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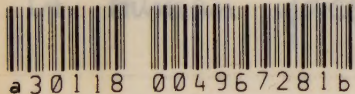
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A HUMAN FACE



"HIS ONE DESIRE WAS TO GET AWAY."

(p. 151.)

A HUMAN FACE

BY

SILAS K. HOCKING

*Author of "Pioneers," "The Heart of Man,"
"The Flaming Sword," "Smoking Flax,"
"One in Charity," etc. etc.*

WITH SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS

BY C. H. TAFFS

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A HUMAN FACE.

CHAPTER I.

THE MISSING PASSENGER.

THE great railway smash at Bogstone was remarkable for several reasons, but chiefly for the unaccountable disappearance of the Rev. Stephen Winslow, who was a passenger by one of the ill-fated trains.

There were three trains involved in the catastrophe. The first was at a standstill, waiting for the signal to go down. The second was the Scotch express, which dashed into the rear of the first with so much violence that most of the carriages were overturned on to the down main line. Three minutes later the down express to Leeds plunged headlong into the heap of wreckage, killing a number of people who had escaped from the first collision.

The confusion was increased by the intense darkness of the night. The fog was so thick that no one could see three yards

in front of him. Moreover, there was scarcely a passenger who had not received a violent shock, and was more or less dazed in consequence.

To make matters worse, there was not a human habitation within a mile, and no one knew in which direction to turn for assistance. The night was bitterly cold. The first snow of winter lay thick upon the ground.

As soon as the unhurt passengers and officials could extricate themselves from the wrecked carriages they went to the assistance of their less fortunate companions. It was a pitiful and heartrending task, and all the more pitiful because in most instances they were powerless to render the help that was needed.

From underneath huge heaps of splintered wood and twisted iron came despairing cries for help, mingling with the groans of others who had passed beyond the power of speech—cries and groans that grew gradually more feeble until they ceased altogether, or were drowned by the noise of hissing steam and crackling flame.

It was a horrible scene upon which the new day looked down. The dead lay in two

long rows by the side of the railway. The massive engines lay on their sides, silent and grim, the carriages were tossed about in inconceivable confusion.

By evening all the passengers had been accounted for save one. The Rev. Stephen Winslow had disappeared, leaving no trace behind him. That he had been a passenger by the down train to Leeds was beyond dispute. His portmanteau was found in the luggage van unharmed. The ticket collector remembered speaking to him not ten minutes before the accident happened. The carriage in which he travelled was splintered almost into matchwood, but he was to be found neither among the living nor the dead.

It was late in the afternoon when his cousin Sam arrived upon the scene. Sam was excited, tearful, and almost incoherent. He examined his cousin's portmanteau very minutely; then he proceeded to the spot where lay the unclaimed dead. It was not a pleasant task, but he faced it grimly and doggedly.

"No," he said at length, when he reached the end of the line; "Stephen is not here."

“ You are quite sure ? ” said one of the railway officials who accompanied him.

“ Absolutely sure. Do you think I should not recognise my own cousin ? ”

“ Many of the faces are very much disfigured.”

“ That’s true enough ; but Stephen is not here. I should know him by his hands if his head were cut off.”

“ Then perhaps he’ll turn up somewhere safe and sound,” and the official sighed.

“ What’s that ? ” Sam questioned excitedly.

“ If he’s not dead, he must be alive somewhere.”

“ Why, yes, of course,” Sam answered slowly ; “ but are you sure there are no more bodies under the ruins ? ”

“ I think so—yes, I think so. We have had a big relief gang at work nearly ever since the accident.”

“ It wouldn’t be possible, I suppose, for a body to be burned to ashes ? ”

“ No, no. The fire was got under too soon for that.”

“ Then where’s Stephen ? That’s what I want to know ? ”



"IT WAS LATE IN THE AFTERNOON WHEN HIS COUSIN
SAM ARRIVED UPON THE SCENE."

"He may be in London by this time," the official answered quietly.

"Do you think it likely?" Sam asked, in an injured tone.

"From what you say he is not here," was the reply.

"That doesn't prove anything," Sam answered querulously.

"Pardon me, I think it proves a great deal. It would be a relief to the company to know that he is not among the dead."

"But he's among the missing."

"For the moment, yes. Possibly by the time you get back you will find him there, waiting for you."

Sam hurried back to town in a condition of mind not easy to describe. Until he received Dr. Priestley's telegram a few hours earlier, announcing that the train was wrecked in which his cousin was travelling to Leeds, he had never considered the possibility of Stephen leaving the world in such a summary fashion.

A number of contingencies presented themselves at once. He was Stephen's nearest relative—in fact, he might say he was his only relative. Stephen was a

young man, and the chances were he had not made a will. Young men without family ties did not usually trouble about such matters unless they imagined they were going to die. It was not likely that Stephen had thought much about dying. Young men think much more about living. Hence, if he had perished in a railway accident, it was possible—nay, it was probable—that he (Sam) would come into possession of his entire patrimony.

To a chronically impecunious man such a prospect would compensate for a good deal. Sam had never hoped to benefit in any way through his cousin. The only tie that existed between them was that of kinship. They had not a single thing in common. There was not a solitary desire or ambition in Stephen's heart that Sam shared. They looked at life and duty from completely opposite standpoints. Sam was a man of the world. He was more—he was of the earth, earthy. In his heart he despised his cousin for giving himself to the service of the poor, when he might take his ease, and eat and drink and be merry.

“No, I shall never get anything out of

Stephen," he would often say to himself. "Stephen cares too much about missionaries and other silly fads. If he never marries he'll leave all his money to some charity."

Hence the news that Stephen had probably perished in a railway accident changed Sam's entire outlook.

"He'll have had no time to make a will," Sam said to himself, as he journeyed toward the scene of the disaster; "in which case I, as nearest of kin, shall take possession."

Sam tried to compose his face to a suitable expression, but all the while his heart kept beating a tattoo. To be lifted suddenly and unexpectedly into a position of comparative affluence almost intoxicated him.

He was sorry, of course. Stephen was his one near relative, and though they had nothing in common, and very rarely met, and generally quarrelled when they did meet—still, blood was thicker than water—though gold was thicker than either.

On the return journey Sam felt considerably depressed, not to say angry. As a dutiful and affectionate cousin he ought to have felt relieved. He told himself that he

was very much relieved and very grateful. He even went so far as to write in pencil on the fly-leaf of his pocket-book the words, "I am very much relieved."

But in his heart he knew he lied. He felt as though fortune had been making a fool of him. To have any kind of possibility dangled before his eyes, and then for it to be suddenly withdrawn was, to say the least of it, irritating and disconcerting.

On reaching London he hurried down East to Stephen's lodgings, to discover that nothing had been seen of his cousin, or heard of him.

Sam heaved a deep sigh, but whether of apprehension or relief it would be hard to say.

Mrs. Billing, Stephen's landlady, was tearful and sympathetic. She loved the young clergyman as if he had been her own son.

"He always paid so reg'lar," she said to Sam. "Always so reg'lar and so lib'el, and never gave no trouble."

"Oh, yes, I can believe all that," Sam said, shortly; "but why did he leave town—that is——"

“ Oh, he was going to a missionary conference,” Mrs. Billing interposed. “ He was going to read a paper—he did tell me what it was all about. Somethin’ about——”

“ Oh, never mind that now,” Sam interjected ; “ do you know when he intended to return ? ”

“ Why, yes ! He intended to be home again to-morrow.”

“ You are quite sure ? ”

“ Absolutely certain, sir. He says to me, ‘ Mrs. Billin,’ says he, ‘ I mustn’t be away from my poor people any longer than I can help.’ ”

“ And was he in good spirits when he went away ? ”

“ Well, no, sir. He ain’t been very cheerful for days past. You see, there’s been a terrible lot of sickness about, and some people he know’d and were very fond of have been struck down——”

“ Oh, yes, yes,” Sam interrupted with a little shudder. “ But there have been no cases in this particular neighbourhood ? ”

“ Well, no, not just here, but it’s spreading, and there’s no knowin’ how fast it will travel, and it ain’t no respecter of persons

either. Some of the ladies who work among the poor have took it bad."

Sam pulled out his watch and looked uncomfortable. "By the bye," he said, speaking rapidly, "there was a rumour some time ago that my cousin—well—contemplated matrimony. Do you know anything about it?"

"You mean that he intended gettin' married?"

"Well, yes. You can put it that way if you like."

"Well, sir, he never said nothin' to me about it. In fact, when he came here first he used to say that no clergyman ought to get marri'd. I forget the name he called it by, but he said he was goin' to be that himself. But I shouldn't be at all surprised if he hadn't changed his mind."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, Miss Dacre was that beautiful and that good to the poor, that a man would have a heart of cast iron not to fall in love with her."

"And you think my cousin fell in love with her?"

"Well, sir, it ain't for me to say. But

people, you know, will talk. And people say they were a great deal together, and were terrible fond of each other, and that he'd given up all his opinions about clergymen not gettin' marri'd, and that he was looking about for a house, and all that. If so, it would be a terrible blow to him."

"What would be a terrible blow?"

"Why, you see, though she know'd it were catchin', she would go on with her visitin' and her good works just as before. She didn't have a bit of fear, people say, but all the same she took it. I heard people sayin' yesterday that if she got better she'd never be anything to look upon again. Seems to me a good deal better she should die, for when a young woman has lost her good looks there ain't much left."

"That's surely an extreme view, Mrs. Billing," Sam said reflectively.

"No, I don't think so, sir," she replied doggedly. "With a man it don't matter much what his looks are, but with a woman it's different; and when a woman's been beautiful, and she's been loved for her beauty, and then all her beauty's took from her at one blow as it were, and the man sees not

the face he used to see, as it were——Oh, dear me, I don't wonder Mr. Winslow were low spirited."

"You have seen this Miss Dacre?" Sam questioned.

"Oh, yes, sir; lots and lots of times, and in all my life I never see one so good to look upon. It seems to me a sin and a shame, and I don't know how the Lord can allow it."

"Allow what?"

"Allow such beauty to be spoiled. The first time she called here—I remember it as if 'twere yesterday—I simply stood stock-still and stared. I didn't know a human face could be so wonderful."

"And you think her illness has preyed upon my cousin's mind?"

"I shouldn't think it at all unlikely. He's been very quiet and absent for days past. Though, of course, he knows that if human skill can preserve her looks and her life it will be done. Dr. Priestley will leave nothing undone that can be done."

"Dr. Priestley is a great friend of my cousin's, I believe? It was he who wired to me about the train smash."

“ They used to be like brothers, sir.”

“ And are they not still ? ”

“ Well, they’ve both grown busier, as it were. And Dr. Priestley hasn’t come as often of late as he used to do.”

“ Rivals perhaps ? ” Sam suggested. But Mrs. Billing did not appear to hear.

A few minutes later Sam took his departure, after getting Mrs. Billing to promise that if she got any news of his cousin she would communicate with him at once.

CHAPTER II.

DEEPENING CONVICTIONS.

DR. PRIESTLEY sat alone in his private room. The hour was long past midnight, and the fire was burning low in the grate, but he sat quite still, staring with unseeing eyes into the fire. For the best part of an hour he had scarcely moved, and the lines about his mouth had not relaxed for a single moment.

He stirred himself at length, and put more fuel on the fire ; then, with a sigh, he sat down again, and rested his chin in his hand. Outside the wind moaned dolorously, and there was a sound as of rain or sleet against the window. By-and-by a clock in a neighbouring church struck two, but he did not seem to hear, or, if he heard, he did not heed.

The fire flamed up more briskly, and traced a line of vermilion on the polished fender. The complaining wind grew louder,

and rumbled assertively in the chimney ; the rain or sleet turned to unmistakable hail, and rattled monotonously on the window-pane.

The doctor stirred himself uneasily, and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“ I wish I knew what had become of him,” he muttered to himself at length. “ A whole week and no news of him, and I let him go without explaining. It was enough to turn his brain. If anything serious has happened to him I shall never forgive myself. And if she gets to know, she will hate me—*hate me!*” And he pushed himself farther back into his chair, and stared harder at the fire than before.

“ And yet, God knows I have thought more of her happiness than of my own,” he went on, after a long pause ; “ and how could she be happy with a man who merely loved her face, and not her soul ? Nevertheless, I ought to have explained. It was cruel of me to let him go without telling him.”

The clock outside chimed the half-hour, and Frank Priestley rose slowly from his chair and stretched himself.

“ I wonder if deviations from the path

of right always bring so swift a penalty," he reflected, as he turned out the light; "or is it that I am too morbidly sensitive?" And he began to climb the stairs like one who had no strength or energy left.

Stephen Winslow and Frank Priestley had shared rooms at Oxford, and grew to be very fond of each other. It was largely a case of extremes meeting, for they had little or nothing in common. Stephen was a High Churchman, Frank was a dissenter. Stephen had quite sufficient means in his own right, Frank had only what his father—a country solicitor—allowed him. Stephen was a religious mystic, Frank a practical man of the world. Stephen revelled in ecclesiasticism, Frank hated it. And yet, in spite of these differences, or perhaps because of them—for it is often very difficult to determine why men are drawn to each other—they got on remarkably well together, and always found something congenial in each other's society. In one thing they were alike—they were both strictly conscientious and sincere. Neither ever dreamed of accusing the other of posing, or of arguing merely for argument's sake. Each held clearly defined opinions, and

was prepared to give a reason, or a dozen reasons, for the faith that was in him.

Less than a year after Frank came up to Bart.'s to study medicine, Stephen found himself a curate in an East-end parish. So it came about that the interrupted friendship was renewed, and continued unbroken until the time of the opening of our story.

Stephen, having ample means, was quite content to remain a curate, and would, indeed, have lived the life of a hermit if he thought he could do good and advance the cause of the Church thereby.

When he settled at St. Timothy's on a peppercorn salary he held strong views on the celibacy of the clergy. He believed that a minister, like a soldier, should go unencumbered into the fray ; that the less he had to do with the world the better it would be for the Church ; that in proportion as he became domestic he would lose in spirituality, and that love for wife and children would weaken his love for the Church.

It is true he did not parade these views. He had little opportunity of doing so. His vicar was a very-much married man, with no end of a family, which he endured with

cheerful resignation, and he would have been quite happy had his family been as large again.

The vicar's large family, however, tended only to strengthen Stephen in his previous conviction. How a man could serve the Church and the world under the incubus of Mrs. Mayne and all the little Maynes was a mystery. There was fourteen stone of Mrs. Mayne to start with, and everything about her was in due proportion.

There was nothing small or niggling about Mrs. Mayne. Broad-minded, as became such breadth of body ; assertive, with an assertiveness born of settled convictions ; unyielding as a mountain of granite. It was her boast that when she put her foot down people knew it.

Mr. Mayne was tremendously proud of his wife. He believed there was not her equal in all England, and Stephen was inclined to think he was right.

"Look at me," he said to Stephen one day, and Stephen looked at him. He was a tall man, and painfully thin. But the merry twinkle in his small grey eyes redeemed the cadaverous face from absolute plainness.

“ Yes, look at me,” he continued ; “ what should I be without my wife ? ”

“ I don’t know, sir,” Stephen answered demurely.

“ Of course you don’t,” and the vicar’s eyes sparkled with glee and gratitude. “ But I’ll tell you, sir. Without my wife I should be nothing. I tell you she’s a wonder—a perfect wonder.”

“ I believe you, sir,” Stephen said quite truthfully.

“ The way she can manage people is simply immense.”

“ She’s immense herself,” Stephen ventured, without thinking.

“ Well, yes, in a way she is,” the vicar answered, a little taken aback. “ But you don’t know her yet, Mr. Winslow. But your admiration will grow as mine does. And I am glad to say Grace takes after her mother in every particular.”

Whether Stephen’s admiration for Mrs. Mayne grew with lapse of time is open to doubt, but he once confided to Dr. Priestley that Grace was a terror.

Stephen got lodgings nearly two miles away from the vicarage, and sternly resolved

that in the first place he would see as little as possible of Grace Mayne, and in the second place that he would never marry. He threw himself into his work with great earnestness and zeal, and soon made a name for himself, which travelled far beyond the bounds of his own parish.

After a time came offers of preferment. But he elected to remain where he was. He liked his work, he had got to know the people among whom he dwelt, and they had got into the habit of looking up to him in times of trouble and perplexity.

From his point of view, his life was almost an ideal one. He was serving no selfish end, striving after no ignoble ambition, following no sensuous desire. He might have lived selfishly had he chosen. There were few worldly desires that he had not the means to gratify; but he had deliberately chosen a life of toil and self-denial. And yet the self-denial was not so great as it looked. He could not have lived the life his cousin Sam lived, however much he tried. He was not built that way—his moral and intellectual make-up inclined him in the opposite direction. In a very true sense the path

of self-sacrifice was also the path of least resistance.

As yet one side of his nature remained untouched and undeveloped. He had no leanings in the direction of domesticity. In the poorer parts of London the domestic side of life does not present a very winning aspect. It is difficult to maintain the ideal of home in a single room.

After his round of visits Stephen generally entered his own solitary room with a sigh of content. He saw so much of nagging wives, and peevish, squalling children, that his own small room seemed like a haven of refuge, and Mrs. Billing a sort of fairy god-mother.

The delights of a real home he had never known, or, if he had known them, they were so far back in the past that they had faded from his memory. His parents had died when he was quite a child. When he was ten he was sent to a boarding-school, and he remained there till he was nineteen, when he went on to the University. His vacations were spent mainly in lodging-houses—his trustees not caring to see more of him than they could help. So he had grown up,

knowing nothing of the real joy of home, and with the domestic side of his nature dwarfed and undeveloped. He was conscious, however, of no feeling of loss. A man does not miss what he has never known. Stephen was quite happy—too happy, he sometimes feared; he was not quite sure that a man had any right to be happy when the majority of people with whom he was brought into contact lived in a condition of chronic misery.

He had little time, however, for speculation or introspection. The claims of a large and densely crowded parish kept him busy from morning till night. He was the only curate, and the vicar was not a very energetic man at the best.

Stephen never thought of complaining at having so much to do. He rather rejoiced in it—to minister to the needs of others was the supreme business of his life. He felt grateful every hour of the day that he had health and strength and the means to minister now and then to the needs of others. No one could say that he was serving at the altar for what he could get. His blessedness was not in receiving, but in giving.

He sometimes compared almost unconsciously his joy with that of Mr. Mayne. The vicar could give nothing. With so many mouths to feed and backs to clothe, his income was mortgaged before it reached him. He saw distress around him every day, and had no power to relieve it. Every thought and interest and anxiety of his life appeared to be centred in his wife and children.

“No, a clergyman ought not to marry,” Stephen would say to himself, with daily growing conviction. Mr. Mayne was a perpetual object-lesson to him. How could a man serve the Church and serve his fellows effectively when domestic cares absorbed all his thought and energy?

And yet this was the least weighty of the arguments that appealed to him. It was rather an illustration than an argument. His anti-matrimonial views found their roots in something deeper—something that the lay mind did not see or appreciate, but which to the true ecclesiastic seemed of immeasurable importance.

Now and then he had talked the matter over with Frank Priestley, but the young doctor only laughed at him.

“My dear fellow,” Frank would say, “you’ll never be a fully equipped minister—will never be able to enter completely into the joys and sorrows of your flock—until you have a wife and children of your own.”

“That shows the unspiritual man in a sentence,” Stephen would retort.

“Not a bit of it,” Frank would answer. “It rather shows the all-round man. We are not all spirit, surely. We are flesh and blood as well. We are not called upon to maim and destroy the larger side of our life, but to live a life that shall be healthily poised, giving play to every side of our humanity.”

But Stephen would shake his head.

“The flesh is to be in subjection to the spirit,” he would answer.

“Exactly—the lower to the higher. But subjection does not mean destruction. We are not angels, but human beings.”

“Human nature is base and corrupt.”

“That’s rather a reflection on the Creator, isn’t it?” Frank would question, with a laugh. At which Stephen would look grieved, and turn the conversation into some other channel.

So the weeks and months passed away, and Stephen got daily more ecclesiastically minded. Open questions hardened into unyielding dogmas, matters of policy strayed imperceptibly into the realm of conscience, expediency and right became interchangeable terms.

Stephen had reached that point when he seriously considered whether he ought not to take upon himself a vow of perpetual celibacy. Was it enough to hold views privately? Ought not a man to make public confession of the faith that was in him—especially when he was a priest?

Stephen was debating that question when Marcella Dacre unwittingly and unconsciously crossed his path. It was a purely accidental meeting—if anything can be accidental in a world that is ruled by an unseen power. An hour earlier or later, a turn to the right or the left, and life and the world would have been different for several people. But it seemed as though fate had decreed that it must be so. Stephen Winslow knew the moment he looked into Marcella Dacre's eyes that he had reached a crisis in his life. For a moment he felt bewildered, almost

stunned. Such beauty he had never seen before. It almost intoxicated him. For awhile he stood spellbound. Then, with a sigh, he pulled himself together.

Life and the world could never be the same to him again.

CHAPTER III.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

MARCELLA DACRE was twenty-two, and her own mistress. She was free to choose her own life, and she chose it with calm deliberation. She made no fuss, took no one into her confidence, proclaimed nothing from the housetop. She saw what seemed to be her duty—dimly at first, but it daily became more clear—and when her mind was made up she had no misgiving and no desire to turn back.

Two courses were open to her, as to most other people. She could live selfishly—live merely for her own personal enjoyment and gratification, or she could seek a nobler joy in trying to make the lives of others brighter and better.

She was by no means sure that she deserved any credit for deciding on the latter course. There was nothing very inviting in the life of a fashionable woman. One soon

grew weary of the daily and aimless round. Even amusements, so called, became a burden, and afternoon calls an affliction too grievous to be borne.

Had she possessed a house of her own she might have found relief and recreation in playing at housekeeping. But since she was only a "lodger," as she termed it, in the house of her only brother, and Mrs. Dacre resented nothing so much as the smallest interference with her domestic arrangements, Marcella was compelled to find an outlet for her energies in some other direction.

Her brother George, who was a Member of Parliament, suggested that she should devote herself to politics, but since that would mean fighting against him—for she disagreed *in toto* with his political views—she deemed it policy to give political questions as wide a berth as possible—at any rate so long as she dwelt under his roof.

There was, of course, one other career still open to her, for she was young, accomplished, and surpassingly fair ; but for some reason the young men with whom she came

into contact did not appeal to her in any degree. A few of them were good enough in their way, and she had no fault of any kind to find with them; but the idea of love or matrimony did not suggest itself.

Curiously enough, the possible ones turned their eyes in other directions; the rest were so absolutely impossible that she had almost reached the conclusion that matrimony was not for her. That, however, did not trouble her in the smallest degree. Matrimony merely for the sake of getting married or having a home was repugnant to every instinct of her nature. But she did sometimes wonder if she would ever meet a man who would be all the world to her—a man whom she would be able to reverence and almost worship. Up to the present no such an one had crossed her path. She had had admirers in plenty, mainly young men who had nothing better to do—idle, extravagant youths, who had never a thought beyond their own personal and immediate wants, and whose horizon was bounded by the doings of what is called Society.

Marcella grew unutterably weary of their vap'd talk and stereotyped professions, and longed for a more bracing atmosphere and a less artificial plane of life. Surely there were men somewhere—men with ideals, men of purpose and conviction. Even her brother George was a political opportunist. He cared only for the party that could give him position, and ultimately, perhaps, office. Anything approaching a passion for right and truth and justice was looked upon as bad form, if not absolutely vulgar. Such influences and such an environment were bound to tell in the long run. Her opinions were being formed and her life shaped unconsciously. Had she been of less hardy fibre, she would have received the stereotyped impression, and yielded to the prevailing pattern.

When the revolt began she did not know, nor how. The truth dawned upon her by slow degrees that she was out of sympathy with her surroundings; that the frivolous, meaningless life that she, along with so many other young women, led was unworthy of the high destiny to which she had been called. That life was intended to be something more

than a vapid and weary round of calls, that there were duties to be done, ideals to be striven for, and ambitions to be realised.

As her eyes gradually opened to the sacredness of duty, doors opened also. She had no plan of campaign. She did what first came to hand. One step led to another, until she found herself one of a little band of heroic souls who found their chief joy in ministering to the needs of others.

Yet Marcella never laboured under any illusion as to the success or failure of her work. Never imagined that charity was a cure for the social ills that existed, never blamed other people for not doing what she was trying to do, never desired any kind of public recognition. She was just trying to live her life in the way that seemed best to her. She saw nothing heroic in it, or even praiseworthy. She had to spend her time and energy somehow, and there was, after all, infinitely more satisfaction in visiting people who welcomed you with tears of gratitude in their eyes, than in paying afternoon calls that were a weariness to everyone concerned.

She was trying to make a poor woman comfortable one afternoon in a rickety chair, when the door was thrown open and Stephen Winslow appeared on the threshold. For a moment he hesitated, and nearly all the colour went out of his face. The vision was as rare as it was beautiful.

Marcella turned her bright, eager face towards him and smiled.

"I fear I am intruding," he said apologetically. "I did not know——"

"Not at all," Marcella interrupted quickly. "Please come in. Mrs. Gaunt has been wondering if you would call."

"I did not hear of her accident until an hour ago," he answered. "I hope it is nothing serious."

"Oh, no, sir, only a few bruises," Mrs. Gaunt answered cheerily. "I might have been dead and done for, as I told this kind, good lady, but I'll soon be out and about again."

"I sincerely hope you will," Stephen answered. "For I know you can't afford to be laid up."

"It was that motor bike as did it," Mrs. Gaunt explained. "They comes hootin'



"THE DOOR WAS THROWN OPEN AND STEPHEN WINSLOW
APPEARED ON THE THRESHOLD."

(A. . .)

round the corner before you knows where you are. I tried to dodge the thing, but lor', sir, I was seeing stars one moment and next door to a corpse the next."

"It—it might have been—been very much worse," Stephen replied slowly and absently, for he was looking at Marcella all the time, and scarcely thinking of Mrs. Gaunt at all.

For the first time in his life he saw a human face that realised to the full his ideal of beauty. There was not a line or a curve or an expression that was not perfect. The rich brown hair, the smooth wide forehead, the delicately pencilled eyebrows, the deep, dark, ever-changing magnificent eyes, the rich full lips, the exquisitely rounded chin, the full round throat—all blended in perfect harmony.

He stood staring, while a sense of intoxication stole over him. Nothing that he had ever seen in his dreams, nothing that he had ever imagined, no face ever pictured by the art of man, was in any degree comparable to this. Here Nature had done her perfect work, had reached the utmost limit of possibility.

Fortunately Marcella was so taken up with the task of trying to make Mrs. Gaunt comfortable with the limited apparatus at her disposal that she did not notice Winslow's eager, wondering looks.

"There," she said at length. "I think you will be comfortable for awhile, and I will look in again later in the day. Besides——" and she glanced up at Stephen and smiled.

"Oh, please don't go on my account," he interrupted. "I—I—in fact, I shall have to go myself. I am glad Mrs. Gaunt has fallen into such good hands."

"It was scarcely a case for the hospital," Marcella explained. "No bones are broken."

What happened after that Stephen never quite knew. He remembered opening the door and following Marcella into the street, and, as he did so, he noticed that she was of medium height and exquisitely shaped.

He closed the door quickly, and in a few hurried steps reached her side. "You will allow me to walk with you a little distance," he said diffidently. "I am curate of this parish."

"Oh, yes, I know," she answered brightly.
"You are Mr. Winslow."

"You have heard my name, then?"

"Many times. Dr. Priestley has often spoken of you, and the work you are doing here."

"You know Dr. Priestley?"

"Very well. We are quite old friends."

"Clever fellow is Priestley. He'll make a great name for himself in time."

"He is most conscientious in his work, and is tremendously interested in all his cases."

"More interested in 'cases' than in human beings," Stephen laughed. "That is the way, I fear, with nearly all doctors; they regard an afflicted fellow-creature not so much as a human being as an interesting case."

"You would if you were a doctor."

"I might; but I am not a doctor, and I'm glad I'm not."

"Every man in his own order," she said, with a little laugh. "You are more interested in the souls of people than in their bodies."

"To save them from the wrath to come

is my great concern," he answered slowly, and with downcast eyes.

"Is it less important to try to save them from the wrath that is?" she questioned.

"Much less, I should say—very much less," he answered, looking at her with earnest, eager eyes. "The body is of little account—" Then he stopped quickly, and his eyes fell. A thought flashed suddenly across his mind which he could not shape into words. Why did this woman appeal to him so? Why was he so anxious to walk by her side? Why did her face stir his soul as the sea is stirred by a storm?

It was not her soul that appealed to him—her character, her goodness. He knew nothing of these things. She might be as vain as she was fair, as shallow as she was beautiful. He knew nothing of her. He did not even know her name. No, it was not her character that appealed to him; it was her face. If some magician could come by and change her good looks into ugliness he would not want to walk a step farther by her side.

She paused at length at an open door in a mean and dingy street.

"Will you go in?" she questioned.

"This is not in my parish," he answered.

"Ah, we have more liberty," she said, with a smile. "Ecclesiastical boundaries don't trouble us. We go anywhere when suffering calls."

He scarcely heard what she said, for the spell of her beauty was still upon him.

"May I not know your name?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, of course you may, if you care to know it. My name is Marcella Dacre."

"And do you come often into this neighbourhood?"

"At present I am living at Trinity Settlement. It is not easy to travel every day from West to East. Besides, there are many advantages in being on the spot."

"No doubt—no doubt." He meant to have said more, but somehow words failed him, and while he hesitated she disappeared through the open door.

He did not attempt to do any more visiting that afternoon. He turned and walked away through the dingy streets like a man in a dream. He came at length to a large churchyard—a green oasis in a

desert of drab. A wise Council had laid it out as a tiny park, and planted trees round the border, and stuck a garden seat here and there that the tired ones might have a chance of rest. In one of the bare trees a throstle was singing, as if glad that spring was on the way once more. Stephen paused and leaned against the rails and listened, and as he did so the song seemed to take shape and colour, and the face of Marcella Dacre came up before him, and her eyes looked into his, and her lips broke into a smile.

He brushed his hand across his eyes at length, as if to wipe out the vision, and then hurried away at twice his usual pace. When he reached his lodgings he threw himself into an easy chair and closed his eyes. He felt as though he had lost his bearings. In one brief hour he had drifted away from his old anchorage, and he did not know where he was. The world seemed an entirely different place, and there was only one human being in it, and her name was Marcella Dacre. He was not in love—the idea was preposterous ; and yet his heart was throbbing with a passionate desire for possession. To possess that perfect face, to be able to

feast his eyes upon it at any and every hour of the day, to bask in its light and sunshine, to go among his fellows in the proud consciousness of possession, to say of this superb creature "She is mine"—that for the moment seemed to dominate every dream and passion of his life. Nothing else mattered. His work, his dabbings in esoteric philosophy, his researches in ecclesiastical history, his dreams of an elaborated ritual, his articles in the *Church Observer* on the relative values of the chasuble and stole—all faded into insignificance.

He sprang to his feet at length, with white face and clenched hands.

"Stephen Winslow," he said, hissing out the words as though in a passion of rage, "you are a fool, and you know it. You are worse than a fool—you are a traitor, a traitor to your most solemn vows, and to your most sacred conceptions of duty. Get rid of this folly, and get rid of it quickly," and he sat down again with a jerk.

Later in the day, when the fire was dying down into ashes, and the house and even the street had grown still, he knelt down on the floor and prayed. He felt as though

he were in danger of losing his soul. A human face, the face of a woman, was coming between him and his most sacred duty—unless he conquered he was doomed.

That was the beginning of the battle. He little dreamed what the end would be.

CHAPTER IV.

SEARCHINGS OF HEART.

IT is easy to find excuses and trick ourselves into the belief that they are reasons. Stephen Winslow fought but a half-hearted battle at best, and then began to search for excuses for yielding so readily to the charms of a beautiful face. He found them without difficulty—any number of them. He had the artistic sense largely developed. It was just as natural and just as inevitable that he should love beauty as that a seraph should love music.

Moreover, what harm was there in it? He was neglecting no duty, ignoring no obligation. He was only opening his heart to an influence that could not be evil, since it brightened the world for him, and turned a desert of bricks and mortar into a paradise.

On the days when he knew he would meet Marcella, nothing troubled him. Sunshine or rain, it was all the same—physical conditions

did not matter. Her face turned the darkest day into brightness, and filled the noisy streets with music. To what all this might lead he did not inquire. He resolutely shut his eyes to the future. To live a day at a time was quite enough, and what was so good to-day surely could not become an evil to-morrow.

He still persuaded himself that he had shed none of his principles. He still believed in the celibacy of the clergy. His friendship for Marcella Dacre, his admiration for her beauty, did not mean matrimony. A man might surely have a woman for a friend without wanting to make her his wife.

Self-deception is one of the easiest things in the world, and one of the commonest. Stephen repeated a number of fallacies to himself so frequently that in time he got to believe them. The things he did not want to see he closed his eyes to, and then contended, with a great show of logic, that they did not exist; while the things he did want to see, he assured himself were growing up before his very eyes. If their form and shape were somewhat obscure, it was only because his eyes were dim, or there was dust

on his spectacles. So-called Christian science has manifold manifestations.

Frank Priestley was quick to notice the growing intimacy, and was not a little perplexed. He had great admiration for Stephen Winslow; for Marcella, his feeling was stronger still, and he feared—knowing Stephen's views—that there might be heart-ache for one or both in the future.

He took Stephen to task one day in a bantering and jocular fashion, but he got no satisfaction out of the interview. Stephen was determined to see no more than he wanted to see.

"I always thought you were absolutely indifferent to women," Priestley said, growing a little more serious.

"So I am, to women as a class," Stephen retorted; "in fact, I would use a stronger word than indifferent. But, to individual women—to selected specimens, shall I say, to rare examples of grace and beauty—my admiration is whole-hearted and complete."

"Such as Marcella Dacre, to wit."

"Exactly. She is one in a million—or a thousand millions for that matter. To be

quite candid, I don't think the world holds her equal."

Frank raised his eyebrows.

"So far gone as that, eh?" he said, reflectively.

"Don't be foolish, Priestley," Stephen said, a little tartly. "There surely can be no harm in admiring a beautiful face, any more than there is harm in admiring a beautiful picture or a choice piece of statuary."

"No harm, of course, providing you are prepared to face and take all the consequences."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that a picture cannot respond—is not affected in any way by your admiration. A woman is not a picture."

"You mean that I may fall in love?"

"Somebody else may fall in love."

Stephen laughed boisterously. "Marcella Dacre is not a creature to be touched by these lower passions," he said with a slight curl of the lip.

"But are you so absolutely safe?" Frank questioned.

"You are not jealous, I hope?" Stephen

said, looking up with a sudden gleam in his eyes.

"You are both my friends," Frank answered seriously. "I know your views on the marriage question. If you were a marrying man I should say nothing."

"My views on the general question remain unchanged."

"Perhaps you think there are justifiable exceptions?"

"I did not say so. But in any case I think I may be left to shape my own future."

Frank bit his lip and was silent. He saw clearly enough that Stephen was in no mood to brook interference or take advice. And yet it was not so much for Stephen that he was troubled. It was of Marcella he was thinking all the time. She had appealed to him even more strongly than she did to Stephen. He (Stephen) admired her for her physical beauty. It was her face that attracted him and held him like a spell. Her character, her disposition, her moral and intellectual qualities, appealed to him only in a very secondary degree. He never took any trouble to sound the depths of her nature. He did not know whether she was

a churchwoman or a dissenter, a catholic or a protestant, a deist or an agnostic. He had a vague suspicion that she was not very much in sympathy with some of his High Church views, and that on political and social questions they had very little in common. But these were topics they did not discuss. They rarely discussed anything ; they avoided, as if by instinct, all contentious topics ; they trod lightly on the surface of things. Consequently, their intercourse was never spoiled by any jarring note.

Stephen Winslow seemed to Marcella the most agreeable man she had ever met. His character revealed itself in his life. She knew him before she met him—at least, she fancied she did. Dr. Priestley had often spoken of him—had praised his devotion to his work, his conspicuous unselfishness, his daily self-sacrifice. Hence she felt that she knew all about him that she wanted to know. She did not need to inquire into his character or antecedents. He was one of the living epistles of the world, known and read of all men. Consequently, she was drawn to him before she met him.

After the vapid and aimless youths with

whom she had been brought into contact, he seemed almost heroic. Here was a man who might live a life of ease and self-indulgence if he chose, giving himself body and soul to help the needy and fallen and out-cast. Labouring in season and out of season without salary and without hope of reward. Turning aside from the pleasant paths and the sheltered ways to foot the steep and stony road of duty and self-sacrifice.

Such a man appealed to her instinctively—won her admiration, her sympathy, and in large measure her affection. When they met she did not want him to expound his views on questions of ritual or dogma. She was glad that he relaxed a little from the strenuous life, and that he accommodated his conversation to her more limited knowledge. His confidence touched her unconsciously, his preference for her company sent a little thrill all through her veins, the light in his eyes set her wondering sometimes what lay behind.

So the days and weeks slipped away almost imperceptibly, and they got more and more intimate and confidential with each other.

And yet during this time Stephen was not without his fits of misgiving. Now and then he felt, almost with a pang of terror, that his growing admiration for a young, wealthy, and beautiful woman was not without very serious danger. He was conscious, in spite of his excuses, that it was affecting his work, and very seriously affecting his studies, and, worse still, it was beginning to affect his views.

In the early summer he did not see Marcella for a whole month, and her absence was the occasion of much heart-searching. He missed her increasingly as the days passed away. The drab, dingy streets seemed drabber and dirtier than they had ever done before. The weather was beautiful and the sky often cloudless, and yet because she was absent everything appeared to be in shadow. He had resolved, during the time she was away, to write an article on the symbolism of ecclesiastical attire. But for some reason he lost interest in the subject. Its importance seemed less than he had imagined. What did it matter? Would this kind of vestment or that affect the destiny of a single human soul?

But such reasoning had its reflex influence. His conscience began to trouble him. He feared that he was departing from the faith—that his interest in the beautiful face was detaching him from important ecclesiastical and theological problems, that he was allowing a single woman to outweigh all the interests of the Church.

Also, the longer Marcella remained away the stronger the desire for possession grew. He could no longer ignore that very positive fact. He wanted to call this magnificent creature his own. That meant marrying her, and he had always vehemently contended that the clergy ought not to marry. He felt as if he were walking across a shifting bog. He was being carried down the slope against his will, while any moment a false step might precipitate him into a position from which he would not be able to extricate himself.

These thoughts generally troubled him in the night-time, while the city slept. When daylight came he was generally able to cast them aside, and find excuses enough to satisfy himself for the moment.

Frank Priestley saw less and less of him.

Frank was junior house-surgeon at a big hospital in the neighbourhood. He stuck to his hospital work for the sake of experience, and for the opportunities it gave him for special research. He was not content with being a mere family doctor. To deal only with effects did not satisfy him. He wanted to get down to the root causes of things, to discover some of nature's hidden secrets, to trace, if possible, diseases back to their origin and source. He was not ambitious to make money, to get a large practice, to be run after by a fashionable crowd ; but he was ambitious to lessen the sum total of the world's suffering, and to find remedies for incurable complaints.

So he worked on steadily and patiently, finding in his work the only remedy for the canker that was eating at his heart. Seeing less of Stephen, he saw less of Marcella.

"She evidently thinks more of the curate than she does of me," he said to himself, a little bitterly ; "and yet I knew her a full year before she ever saw his face."

He might have seen more of her if he had cared to put himself in her way. But,

for some reason, he grew shy and reserved. He felt that he was not wanted.

“New friends are sometimes better than the old,” he said to himself, with a touch of cynicism in his tone.

Moreover, he reasoned it out that he would not be in a position to marry for several years, and, even if Stephen had not been in the way, it would not be fair to ask a woman to wait an indefinite period; and yet he loved Marcella with a devotion that he felt he would never feel for another. Loved her, not because she was fair to look upon—mere physical beauty did not appeal to him as it did to Stephen—but because she was of so generous a nature, so large of soul.

Frank’s was the nobler love, Stephen’s the more passionate. Frank’s love was like a river—deep, silent, and slow-moving. Stephen’s was like a mountain torrent—swift, noisy, and impetuous.

By the time Marcella had got back from her summer’s rest Stephen’s passion had swept nearly everything before it. His philosophy had broken down completely. His views respecting the celibacy of the clergy had undergone considerable modification.

He was still of opinion that the general principle held good, but there might be justifiable exceptions. When he got so far as that, the rest was easy. He was at liberty to woo Marcella Dacre, and, if possible, win her ; for, of course, his was one of the justifiable exceptions. There were fifty reasons why he might marry, which could not be adduced in favour of fifteen hundred other people.

In truth, however, his heart and head were still at variance ; but love laughed at logic, and principles, so-called, went down before the weight of an overmastering passion.

Marcella came back to the East-end after her month's rest, looking lovelier than ever, and when Stephen caught sight of her across the street he felt as helpless as an infant. Arguments, principles, convictions, creeds, were all swept away in a moment, like chaff before a whirlwind.

"Life is a compromise," he said to himself, helplessly. "I'm bound to give up something ; and if I give up Marcella I shall die."

CHAPTER V.

STEPHEN WINSLOW PROPOSES.

It was not until late in the autumn that Stephen proposed to Marcella. Two things had contributed to the delay. In the first place, he was in very considerable doubt as to the kind of answer he would receive ; and, in the second place, he was in still greater doubt as to the wisdom or propriety of such a step. The fascination of Marcella's beauty was as strong as ever, the desire for possession had even increased, but——

Alas ! there are "buts" in every case. There is scarcely a step in life that we do not take with some measure of misgiving ; so tangled and interwoven are life's manifold interests, that an advantage in one direction often means a corresponding disadvantage in another.

Stephen fought a fitful and more or less half-hearted battle all through the summer. He had made up his mind to win Marcella

for his wife if that were possible, and yet he hesitated, and even feared, to take the final step. Would he be perfectly satisfied in case he succeeded? Would he ever regret the step when it was too late to retrace it? Would physical beauty pall upon him in time? Familiarity, it was said, bred contempt. There came a time when you ceased to notice the pictures on your walls. The sublimest beauty ceased to charm after a while.

Moreover, a human face was not like the mountains and sea, that never grew old—not like a picture, that would keep its freshness for a hundred years. Its beauty was almost as evanescent as spring flowers. Disease might touch it, and it would vanish; the winds of time blew upon it, and it was gone. What then? What if, after he had shed some of his most cherished convictions, and run counter to his better judgment, he reached a point where fascination ceased and beauty no longer appealed to him?

A picture he could change, a landscape that palled upon him he could leave behind; but a wife was a fixture. She might lose her temper and her good looks at the same

time, but there was no getting away from her.

Now and then he felt that it was mean and cowardly and unworthy to let such thoughts take possession of his brain for a single moment. At other times he complimented himself on his prudence in counting all the cost.

Such questions, however, rarely obtruded themselves when in Marcella's presence—her beauty was so fresh, so independent of everything adventitious, that it seemed to him as though it could never fade, that time could only ripen it, and years add to its charm.

Several times during the summer he was on the point of proposing to her, but something in her manner kept his words in check. She was always delightfully frank with him. Sometimes she seemed almost affectionate. While her admiration for his character and work came out in a hundred little ways, he doubted if she was touched by any other feeling. He did not reflect that a proposal to a woman is sometimes what a match is to a well-laid fire. What may have lain dormant for months leaps into flame at a word.

It was well on in October when he took his courage in both his hands, and told her without any waste of words she had become so necessary to his happiness that he could not live without her—that unless she became his wife life would lose its charm and the world its interest.

It was evident, by the look that swept over her face, that she was taken by surprise. She remembered in one of her conversations with Frank Priestley that he had told her of Stephen's strong views on the celibacy of the clergy, and so the idea of his making love to her had never crossed her mind. Had she thought there was a possibility of his marrying, she might have thrown a little more reserve into her intercourse with him.

"Are you quite sure that you are not mistaken—that this is not a passing fancy?" she said at length, quite calmly.

"No; I have been considering it for months," he answered. "I have been miserable when you have been away. I have been in an ecstasy when you came back."

"But I have understood it was an article of your creed that clergymen should not marry."



"SHE SAW THAT HE WAS IN DEADLY EARNEST

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"It was, until I saw you," he said fervently. "Your coming into St. Timothy's changed everything."

"But should you treat convictions so lightly?" she questioned.

"I do not treat them lightly," he stammered. "Believe me, I am no turncoat or time-server. But there is no rule that has not its exceptions. Generally speaking—as a matter of policy, and in the best interests of the Church—I think a clergyman should be unencumbered, if I may say so; but in exceptional cases, I think it is possible a married man may do better service than a single man."

"And you think yours is one of those exceptional cases?" she questioned, with a smile.

"I do, upon my conscience," he answered eagerly. "I have not run into this matter lightly. I have faced all the issues. I don't think I have run away from a single question. Without you my hands will seem paralysed."

She looked up at him for a moment, and then her eyes fell. She saw that he was in deadly earnest, though he had not said a

word about love. But, of course, that was implied in his proposal.

"I see you hesitate," he went on, after a moment's pause. "Perhaps I have taken you by surprise. I do not wish you to do anything without due reflection. This is a matter on which the happiness, and perhaps the usefulness, of both our lives depend."

"I am taken by surprise," she answered, without looking at him. "You see, believing what I did, such an idea had never occurred to me."

"But you must have seen how I favoured your company, and how—how I took you into my confidence."

"Yes; and I have been very proud of your confidence. And I have honoured you and admired you more than I can express——"

"Then you have no objection to me personally?" he interjected eagerly.

"I think the world of you—as—as—a clergyman and a friend," she stammered. "Indeed, I am not worthy of your affection."

He laughed a little uneasily.

"You must not speak in that way," he

said. "Clergymen are only men, and often only ordinary men at that."

"But you have sacrificed so much, have laboured for the love of it, have refused promotion, have done so much for the poor."

"Not more than you have done," he replied.

"What little I have done has been in self-defence. A woman must have some interest in life. Don't imagine I have been sacrificing myself. I have escaped from an atmosphere and a mode of life I could no longer endure."

"But you love the work for its own sake."

"There is always a pleasure in giving pleasure to other people. Please don't place me on a pedestal. I hope you have not been idealising me."

"That is impossible," he replied fervently. "I mean that no ideal can transcend the actual——"

She raised her head suddenly.

"You do not understand me," he said hurriedly. "It is not an ideal that has captured me and conquered me—it is your

own self. Oh ! believe me, you are the one woman in the world for me."

"I am not at all sure that I am fitted for the position you would place me in," she said slowly. "In all social service you have my fullest sympathy ; but beyond that——"

"Please do not raise objections," he interrupted, with a smile. "Believe me, I have considered them all. If you were a Buddhist, or a Mohammedan, I should still desire you, as I do now. Oh, Marcella, do you not see that without you my interest in life will go spark out ? "

"But you will not expect me to give a final answer to-day ? " she questioned. "It is a matter of such solemn moment, and I was so unprepared for your avowal——"

"I hoped you had guessed," he interposed, with a faint sigh. "Women are supposed to be so keen in such matters."

"Ah ! But, you see, I had taken it for granted that you would never marry," she said brightly.

"I am beginning to think it is unwise for young men to make vows on such questions," he answered, with an absent look in

his eyes. Then, with sudden eagerness :
“ But you will think favourably of my suit,
will you not ? ”

“ I will not decide hastily,” she answered,
and her eyes fell again.

“ But that does not mean, I hope, that
you will keep me a long time ? ”

“ Oh, you must not be impatient,” and
she raised her head and smiled brightly into
his face.

“ That means that you are going to say
yes,” and he raised her hand to his lips and
kissed it. “ Am I not right ? ” he queried.
Then he said good-bye, and turned his steps
towards home. He felt quite confident that
her answer would be yes—so confident was
he that not a shadow of misgiving crossed
his mind. The thing was settled—Marcella
Dacre was his.

Now that the plunge was taken he was
in his most sportive and hilarious mood.
All the doubts and fears and questions that
had been troubling him for months vanished.
He had been like a bather afraid to take
the plunge ; but now that the shock was
over, and his head was above water again, he
felt astonished at his previous timidity.

When he got home he threw himself into his easy-chair before the fire, and gave himself up to dreams of the future. How proud he would be to introduce Marcella to his friends ! And how pleased he would be to overhear remarks respecting her grace and beauty !

For the moment questions of ritual and creed seemed of little account. The splendour of Marcella's face threw everything else into shadow. He was going to possess the rarest jewel in the world ! It was this passion for possession that still dominated him. He was like a collector of gems, who had come into possession of some precious stone that was supposed to be lost. He was eager to get the jewel case ready so that he might show off his prize to the best advantage. Eager to get the knot tied that should bind Marcella to him for ever.

He took no one into his confidence, however. Mrs. Billing rather wondered at his absent-mindedness, but, like a discreet woman, said nothing, though she chuckled to herself a few days later when she heard that Mr. Winslow had been looking over an empty house.

Meanwhile, Marcella had been giving her best thought to Stephen's proposal, and the more she thought of it the more favourably she regarded it. At the first, she felt that something was lacking, but whether the lack was in Stephen or in herself she hardly knew. But, in any case, that which made her doubt and hesitate was slowly dissolving.

For the first day or two she could not help comparing him with his friend, Dr. Priestley, and the comparison was distinctly in Dr. Priestley's favour. Priestley was the handsomer man of the two, and, on the whole, no doubt the cleverer man of the two. But then he was poor ; moreover, he was wedded to his work, and had no eyes for human beings except as "cases." Besides all that, he had never hinted of love to her, though at one time she did think he was fonder of her than of anyone else, and if he had proposed to her she would not have been greatly surprised. The weeks and months, however, had slipped away, and he had said nothing. The look in his eyes had never been translated into speech. Evidently he was too engrossed in his work to give love a second thought.

Meanwhile, the unexpected had happened. Stephen Winslow had discovered he loved her, and wanted her to be his wife. It could be no ordinary love in his case. It was a love that swept away all barriers, that broke down all prejudices, that submerged principles even, and made him turn his back on convictions that at one time were part and parcel of himself.

Such a love appealed to her mightily. It was not a light and airy thing to be trifled with—it was a love that would endure—great and beautiful and resistless—a love that would find its expression in reverence and in something akin to worship.

Her own affection for Stephen might be only like a tiny rivulet in comparison ; but it would grow. Like would beget like. To live with such a great, unselfish soul would awaken all that was best in her.

In a day or two Dr. Priestley began to recede into the background. He was devoted to his profession, no doubt. But why ? He was ambitious to get on, to make for himself a name, to stand in the front rank of his profession. But Stephen Winslow had no selfish ambition at all. He lived to do good, he

worked for practically no salary, he spent most of his own income in relieving the needs of others; hence there could be no possible doubt as to which was the greater man.

She might not be worthy to be his wife, but she could strive to make herself worthy. To say "No," might blight her own life and his. There might be absent in her case that ecstatic thrill of which novelists wrote—but that was a small matter; she was no longer a schoolgirl. Moreover, thrills soon came to an end—it was reverence that endured.

She came back to her room one evening very tired, for there was a good deal of sickness in the neighbourhood, and she had been visiting all the day.

"This waiting and indecision is telling on my nerves, I think," she said to herself, with a smile. "I shall feel better when I have settled the question once for all."

And she sat down to her writing-table and penned a sweet and frank acceptance of Stephen's offer.

"Dear Stephen," she whispered, and smiled serenely. Then she sealed the letter,

and placed it on the mantelpiece. "He will get it in the morning," she whispered; and she smiled again.

CHAPTER VI.

AN INTERESTING CASE.

THERE was consternation in the neighbourhood, and more or less throughout London, when the character of the epidemic became known. It was so unexpected. Moreover, it developed with such startling rapidity that even the doctors were thrown off their guard. In twenty-four hours there were fifty cases in as many different streets.

The Isolation Hospital, which had been almost empty for some time, was got ready at once, and Frank Priestley was installed as medical officer in chief.

In the second batch of patients brought to the hospital was Marcella Dacre. She had to take her chance among the rest. In presence of such a public danger no unnecessary risks could be run. She would not have chosen a hospital to suffer in, perhaps to die in ; but she had no choice in the

matter, and she was too overwhelmed to raise any objection.

She was not very well when she wrote her letter of acceptance to Stephen Winslow, but she thought little of it. During the night, however, she grew rapidly worse. In the morning she felt so ill that she made no effort to get up. At noon a doctor was sent for, and at nine o'clock that evening she occupied bed No. 16 in a long hospital ward.

Frank Priestley came on the scene a few minutes later, and started back with a little gasp of astonishment.

"Miss Dacre!" he said, in a tone of horror, and he clenched his hands as if in physical pain.

She did not reply for several moments, but her eyes filled suddenly.

"Don't try to keep me alive," she said at length, feebly and brokenly.

"Not try to keep you alive?" he questioned, in a tone of surprise.

"It is better that I should die," she said in the same feeble voice. "Perhaps this is my punishment for being so vain."

“Vain!” he echoed. “I do not understand you.”

“No man understands what is in a woman’s heart,” she answered, pathetically. “But I could not help knowing that I was fair to look upon.”

“Your friends have told you?” he questioned.

“Everybody has told me,” she said, with a pathetic smile—“everybody but you.”

“And I would have told you had I dared,” he answered suddenly. Then he turned away with an abrupt movement, and clenched his hands again.

“It has been my only asset,” she answered, without noticing. “I have prized it too much. Is God so jealous, do you think?”

“You should not talk in that way,” he said. “God is not jealous at all in the way you mean; and, after all, it is not the beauty of the face that holds the heart and endures. Time will wither all material loveliness. It is the beauty of the soul that abides.”

“Oh, yes, but time does it so gently and

imperceptibly that you are scarcely conscious of the fact ; but to be robbed of all you possess in a day ! ”

“ Nothing can rob you of your best possession,” he answered ; “ not even death.”

“ I do not fear death,” she said ; “ at least, I do not fear it much. But to face life maimed and withered, to walk a human wreck where once I flaunted myself gay as a butterfly, to be an object of pity to the end of my days—is a thought I cannot bear.”

“ If God wills it, He will give you strength to bear it,” he answered, reverently.

“ But He surely cannot will it,” she wailed, the tears running down her cheeks. “ He will let me die sooner.”

“ He will do what is best, and help me to do what is best,” Frank answered. “ Meanwhile, try not to distress yourself. Remember that medical science is able to do wonders in these days, and, if human skill can save you and preserve to you what you desire, it will be done.”

“ Perhaps I shall be calmer to-morrow,” she answered ; “ or perhaps I shall be too

ill to care. Will you send word to Mr. Winslow, and ask him to pray for me?"

He bowed his head in token of assent, and then walked away to another part of the ward.

Frank Priestley slept very little that night. The sight of Marcella Dacre suffering and in tears had almost unmanned him. He felt that he never loved her so much as now in her helplessness, never so longed to take her to his heart and comfort her.

It was not her face—beautiful as it was—that attracted him and won his love. It was the beauty of her character, the sweetness of her disposition, the generosity of her heart. She was so womanly, so free from cant and affectation, so ready to serve others, so anxious to do good. In short, it was the woman's soul that he had learned to love—and not her face.

If every remnant of her beauty were taken from her, he would still love her. She was the one woman he had ever met who answered to his ideal, and to see her brought within the grip of death seemed for the moment to paralyse all his faculties.

He did not know that she was the affianced

wife of Stephen Winslow. Indeed, he had been cherishing the hope that the fierce fire of Stephen's infatuation was dying down, and he was steadily regaining his normal condition.

That Stephen's admiration for Marcella had caused him a good deal of anxiety he did not deny. Indeed, to put it into plain language, he had been jealous of his friend, and more concerned about Marcella's future.

A jealous man, it is said, can never see straight. Consequently, Frank Priestley believed that Stephen Winslow did not really love Marcella, and that if he married her he had not the power to make her happy.

"He is just infatuated with her beauty," he said to himself again and again; "but the infatuation, in spite of his anti-matrimonial convictions, may carry him to the point of proposing to her, and if he does she will say yes. I do not know what there is in clergymen that women admire so much, but the fact remains that an ordinary layman hasn't a ghost of a chance if a white necktie blocks the way;

and if Stephen proposes to Marcella she'll accept him, and they'll both be miserable ever after."

But the weeks had slipped away and grown into months, and Frank had begun to hope that there might be yet a chance for him. Stephen evidently had not proposed to her. Possibly his creed was too strong for him; or it might be that his passion for a lovely face was burning itself out.

Then another thought struck him: Suppose Marcella should come out of this illness with her beauty marred and destroyed, what would be the effect upon Stephen? If it was the human face he loved, and not the human soul, would not his love shrivel up and die? Hence, after all, there might be a soul of good in things evil. If her illness would cause Stephen to cease his attentions, then her illness might be a blessing in disguise.

This, of course, was the reasoning of a man whose heart was torn with love and jealousy. A man who had hoped, almost against hope sometimes, that in some way Stephen might be disillusioned, and that, in

the chances of the future, he might be able to win Marcella's love.

Frank managed to snatch a very little sleep between the small hours and daylight, and then he hurried back again into the hospital ward. There was not so much that he could do personally. The chief thing was to see that the nurses carried out his orders.

Marcella greeted him with a pathetic smile, but scarcely spoke. She was much weaker than on the previous evening, and the crisis would not be reached for several days.

He could not help recalling her words as he stood looking at her. She had often told him in her bright, playful way that with him an afflicted human being was just a case—a very interesting case, perhaps, but still only a case.

If that were ever true it was true no longer. For once, at any rate, a patient was more than a case. He felt as if he would willingly and gladly give his life if he could save this woman from pain.

He saw her several times during the day, and again late at night. He was resolved

that all that medical science could do should be done. He carefully noted every symptom, and watched with intense eagerness and anxiety every change. What the issue would be it was yet impossible to say.

On the following evening he sat with his head in his hands; staring at the fire, and thinking out the case. He occupied a small, two-storied house fifty yards away from the main building, and connected with it by a covered way.

The night was dark and cold, with a keen and searching wind. Suddenly a sharp rat-tat-tat came to the door, and he rose at once, and went into the passage. Before he could reach the door the knock was repeated.

"Somebody in a great hurry," he said to himself, and he shot back the bolt and threw the door open.

"Thank God I've found you in!" Stephen Winslow ejaculated fervently, and he stepped at once across the threshold.

"You are not afraid?" Frank said, in a questioning tone.

"I have never any fear for myself," was the reply. "A clergyman should always be prepared to stand by the side of the doctor."

" You have not been across to the hospital ? "

" No ; but I am going."

" Not to-night," was the firm answer. " And if you will take my advice you will not attempt to go at all."

" But she may die."

" You mean Marcella Dacre ? "

" Of course I do. Who else should I mean ? Do you know, I did not hear till this afternoon that she was ill. I went down to the Settlement feeling happier than I had ever felt in my life before. I was anticipating seeing her more than words can tell. And then, without warning, the blow fell. Good heaven ! I thought for the moment I had gone mad."

Frank listened with compressed lips and knitted brows. What did this talk mean ? How far had matters proceeded with them ? Had he finally made up his mind to propose to her ?

He was too proud, however, to ask any questions. If Stephen liked to take him into his confidence he could do so, but he would not attempt to force his way there.

" Come into my sitting-room," he said

at length, and he led the way, and pushed round his easy chair for his guest.

Stephen dropped into the chair with a sigh, and tossed his wide-awake hat into a corner of the room.

“Tell me,” he said, with a sudden movement ; “is she very ill ? ”

“She is very ill indeed.”

For a moment or two Stephen fidgeted uneasily in his chair, and tugged hard at the golden cross suspended to his watch-chain.

“Look here,” he said at length ; “I want you to be frank with me——”

“You want to know if she will recover ? ” Frank interposed.

“No, not exactly that—at least, not in the first instance. What I want to know is, will she lose her good looks ? ”

“And what if she does ? ” Frank asked, with a slight curl of the lip.

“Oh, man, I think I would rather bury her than see her beauty defaced.”

“Then pray that you may bury her.”

“You mean——” he exclaimed, springing suddenly to his feet, and glaring at Frank

as though his eyes would start out of their sockets. "You mean——"

"It is impossible to say with absolute certainty yet," Frank interposed quietly. "Everything that medical science can suggest is being done. I don't think she will die—indeed, I feel certain she won't; but, for the rest——" And he shrugged his shoulders suggestively.

"You give no hope?" Stephen questioned with a groan, and he dropped back into his chair again.

"If we can save her life it is surely a great deal."

"I don't know—I don't know. Her beauty was of no common order. In fact, it was herself. If you destroy it you destroy Marcella—she becomes some other person. The old beautiful Marcella is gone, and something unlovely takes her place."

"You think so?"

"Of course I think so. What else can I think? Don't you think the same?"

"No, I don't," and he shut his teeth like a gin.

"Ah! you never did appreciate loveliness

—it is not in you—you were not built that way.”

“Perhaps you are right. Still, there are compensations in everything.”

For awhile no other word was spoken. Then Stephen rose slowly to his feet ; his face was drawn and troubled, his eyes were full of pain.

“I must see her for myself,” he said, as if thinking aloud.

“You will regret it if you do.”

“I can’t help that. Any nurse will direct me to her bed, I suppose ? ”

“Her number is sixteen for the present ; she is to have a room to herself as soon as possible. But let me urge you again not to go. Ordinary visitors, of course, we absolutely refuse, but a clergyman is privileged.”

Stephen hesitated for a moment, then, without another word, turned and left the room.

Outside the house he stood stock-still, and turned his face toward the hospital.

“He was emphatic about to-night,” he muttered to himself ; “but it is quite early yet. Why should I wait till to-morrow ? I

must see with my own eyes—I must—I must!” And he hurried at once to the hospital and pushed open the door and entered. A few minutes later he emerged again, and staggered away through the darkness like a man smitten with some mortal disease.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT STEPHEN SAW.

A LITTLE before midnight Frank went his last round for the night. During the five or six hours he had been absent from the wards a few changes had been made. Marcella had been given a small room to herself, and her place taken by a very bad case that had been brought in just after dark. Two other small rooms had been fitted with beds, to which patients had been removed and their places taken by fresh arrivals. The hospital was now occupied to its utmost limits.

Frank walked down the long ward slowly and silently, now pausing for a moment or two, and then moving forward again. At No. 16 he gave a sudden start, and swept his hand swiftly across his eyes. He had not been informed of the changes that had been made, and was not prepared for the sight that met his eyes.

He recovered himself, however, in a moment, and began to pay more particular attention to the patient. Up to the present it was the worst case he had seen.

A moment or two later he was joined by a nurse. He looked at her inquiringly, but did not speak.

"We have given Miss Dacre the room in the south wing, as you wished," she said, as if in answer to his inquiring look.

"I did not think you would have got it ready until to-morrow," he said. "However, I am very glad ; she will be more comfortable there."

"You see, we had to make room somehow for the fresh cases, and when the room was ready we took her there at once."

"Quite right ; I am very glad." Then he lowered his voice and walked away by the nurse's side. "This, by the bye, is a very bad case," and he glanced back over his shoulder.

"Yes ; it is the worst we have ever seen."

"Not likely to pull through, I should think."

"It seems hardly possible."

He pulled open the door at the end of the ward for her to pass out, and followed her.

“ I suppose you have nothing special to report ? ” he questioned.

“ Well—no,” she answered in a hesitating tone—“ that is, so far as the patients are concerned ; but one or two of us were quite startled an hour or two ago.”

“ Yes ? ” he said, glancing up with sudden interest.

“ You know, doors are never locked in a place like this. Most of them are open day and night. An infectious hospital, as it is called, doesn’t need bolts.”

“ No ; people generally give it a wide berth.”

“ Well, I was sitting reading by the stove. I fancy Nurse Reynolds was asleep—when suddenly the door was pushed open, and a clergyman entered.”

“ No ! ”

“ It is the sober truth I am telling you. I was so startled that I simply sat still and stared. He did not seem in the least disconcerted. He looked right and left at the numbers, and then walked boldly up to

No. 16 and stopped, and you should have seen the look of amazement—of absolute horror—that swept over his face. I thought at first he would faint.”

“It would have been a shock to anyone who is not used to it.”

“He quickly recovered himself, however, and after staring for several seconds at the pitiable object before him, he turned and walked away.”

“And did you not speak to him?”

“No; I was too fascinated, if I may use the term. Nurse Reynolds, however, was wide awake by this time, and followed him out of the room.”

“Well?”

“She could get very little out of him. He seemed in a great hurry to get into the open air. ‘I came to see No. 16,’ he said; ‘I am greatly interested. Good-night.’ And he pulled open the door and plunged into the darkness. Do you know anything about him?”

“I think I do.”

“If he had given Nurse Reynolds the opportunity she would have explained; for she remembered directly after that the



"I CAME TO SEE NO. 16"

(A. 81)

No. 16 he came to see was not, in all probability, the one he saw."

"Exactly. Serves him right, however ; he had no business to come into the hospital without permission."

"Do you know, when I saw a tall, black figure walking silently up the ward I thought for a moment it was a ghost."

"Or Satan ?"

"Well, I'm not sure that even that suggestion did not cross my mind."

The doctor laughed a little hard laugh, and then hurried back to his own room. He felt considerably irritated that, in spite of all he had said to Stephen Winslow, he had deliberately defied him and gone into the hospital without guidance and without permission. On the other hand, there was a little grim humour in the fact that he had been unwittingly and unintentionally deceived, and for the moment Frank Priestley was not in the humour to undeceive him.

"It may do him good," he said to himself reflectively, as he threw himself into his easy chair after putting more fuel on the fire. "It may help to clear his vision," and he struck a match and lighted a cigar.

It was considerably past midnight, but he was not in the least humour for bed. His conversation with Stephen, and Stephen's subsequent conduct, had excited him more than he knew. Two things stood out very clearly in his mind. The first was that Stephen was passionately attached to Marcella, and the second was that his attachment rested mainly on the uncertain foundation of physical beauty. Of course, he might be mistaken in his second position. Marcella's beauty might be only a small factor in the case. It was just possible that he loved her for herself alone, for the beauty of her character and disposition ; and yet if he did, why did he speak of Marcella's beauty being herself ? On the balance of evidence, therefore, he was more than ever inclined to believe that Marcella's chief charm in Stephen's eyes was her good looks.

" I wonder what he thinks now ? " Frank Priestley said to himself, as he stretched out his legs before the fire and blew a cloud of tobacco smoke into the air ; and he chuckled softly to himself.

" Very likely by this time he is dis-

illusioned, and if so it will be a good thing all round."

Deep down in his heart Frank felt that the proper and honourable thing for him to do would be to write to Stephen at once and tell him of the mistake he had made—that the scarred and unlovely face he had seen was not Marcella's, and so set his mind at rest on a point that was evidently torturing him almost beyond endurance. But Frank was in no mood to consider the finer shades of right and wrong. What man is, when his heart is torn with love and jealousy?

"If Stephen's love is genuine, and not a mere infatuation," he said to himself, "it will survive what he has seen to-night; but if it is a mere infatuation, as I believe, then the mistake is a fortunate one—fortunate for Stephen, fortunate for Marcella, and, perhaps, fortunate for me."

Every now and then something seemed to whisper to him, "You had better do the generous and honourable thing, and leave the issues in higher hands. Tell him that he was mistaken. Tell him that Marcella will recover, and that it is quite within the

bounds of probability that her beauty will be unimpaired.

But he was in no humour to listen to the voice or act upon the suggestion.

Why should he throw away his own chance in favour of a man who he believed would never make Marcella happy? Stephen was a good man, no doubt—unselfish and unworldly—a man absolutely devoted to his work, and generous to the last degree. But he was not a domestic man, and if he had not been smitten by Marcella's beauty, would never have dreamed of marrying.

"Moreover," Frank said to himself, "I shall never have another chance equal to this; never find Marcella in so impressionable a mood; never have such another opportunity of touching her sense of gratitude; and if I don't make the most of my opportunity now, I shall not deserve to win her."

So when he had finished his cigar, he put the light out and went slowly upstairs to bed.

Next morning, when he was dressing, something seemed to whisper in his ear, "You had better wire to your friend this

morning," but he was even less disposed to listen to the suggestion than on the previous night.

"If Stephen chooses to play such stupid tricks he must take the consequences," he said to himself. "I daresay he has had a very uncomfortable night. Perhaps it will do him good." And in that mood he continued throughout the whole of that day and the next.

To describe Stephen's state of mind as "uncomfortable" was not to do it justice. He had seen, as he believed, the destruction of the fairest picture on which the eyes of man had ever looked. Consequently, he was not only grieved—he was angry and rebellious. It seemed a cruel thing and a wicked thing to mar such beauty as that which had gladdened his eyes for the best part of a year.

For the first time in his life he felt unable to pray. He was not resigned, and there was no use in pretending to be. How could he be resigned to what had taken place? He might have felt less bitter if he had not seen with his own eyes. But he had been determined to see, to know the worst; and

now the very thought of it brought a look of horror into his eyes.

For the whole of the night he lay tossing on his bed, and never for a moment did sleep visit his eyes. His beautiful dream was at an end ; the lovely picture he had longed with such passionate desire to possess had been destroyed ; Marcella had vanished into the infinite ether, and that which filled her place was not Marcella.

He came late downstairs and made a pretence of eating, but every mouthful of his breakfast threatened to choke him. Before Mrs. Billing he did his best to appear cheerful and unconcerned, but she was clear-eyed enough to see that it was largely pretence.

As the day passed away, another mood possessed him. It was God's method of punishing him for letting his thoughts and desires run after carnal things. He had been forgetting what was due to his high office and his lifelong profession. He had allowed a woman to beguile him, to undermine his convictions, and steal away his affections from the Church.

Instead of being angry, he ought to be

penitent. Contrition, and not resentment, ought to be in possession of his heart. Earthly beauty had been destroyed that he might see more clearly the beauty of holiness.

Before nightfall, penitence and passion, anger and resignation, fought each other for the mastery. One hour he stormed and raved, the next he prayed; and when he retired to rest that night he was worn out both in body and mind.

The next day he was calmer, and busied himself with his address, which he had to deliver before a missionary conference in Leeds; but he sent no inquiry to the hospital, neither did any message come to him.

Outwardly he was unmoved and apparently unconcerned. A dull, unemotional stoicism was taking possession of him. He would have to wait; he could decide nothing yet. Dr. Priestley had told him that Marcella would recover. His penalty might be more than loss. He might be compelled to redeem his promise, or——

But what was the use of anticipating? Marcella had not accepted his offer. Her letter was still on the mantelpiece, where she

had placed it. But neither he nor she knew that.

He added the finishing touches to his paper, and then went to the bank and drew out a fairly large sum of money. He had intended from the first that the climax of his speech should be a handsome donation. It was easy to talk about what ought to be done. The main thing was to do. He was not going to let the trouble through which he was passing stay the liberality of his hand. The missionary cause ought not to suffer because he had been disappointed in his hopes.

He slept better that night, though he woke in the morning feeling stupid and unrefreshed. He hoped that there would be some message from the hospital, though why he should hope he hardly knew. Had he not seen with his own eyes, and did he not know that the beauty he had adored had perished for ever?

He packed into his portmanteau things enough to last him a month, though he expected to be away only a couple of nights at the outside. Mrs. Billing watched him narrowly whenever he gave her the oppor-

tunity. He did not seem at all himself. He talked of one thing, and appeared all the while to be thinking of something else.

The short November day had already begun to fade when he started on his journey. It was quite dark when he reached King's Cross. At the telegraph office he hesitated for a moment. He had sent no message to Marcella since she was taken ill, and she was practically his affianced wife. Should he send her a line to let her know that he was thinking of her—that he was filled with grief, and fear, and misgiving?

He turned away at length with a little sigh, and made for the ticket office. What could he say in a telegram that would satisfy himself or her? Better say nothing. Time alone could straighten out the tangle.

So he went away from London. That he was in the train smash at Bogstone there was no room for doubt, but after that every trace of him was lost.

CHAPTER VIII.

ANXIETY.

As day after day passed away and no news was received of Stephen, Frank Priestley became very anxious and troubled. Try as he would, he could not rid himself of the conviction that he was in some measure responsible. If he had only told Stephen the truth, as he ought to have done, this would not have happened.

The theory that shaped itself in Frank's mind was that the shock Stephen received on the night he visited the hospital had turned his brain. Nor was he greatly surprised at it. Stephen's passion for beauty amounted almost to idolatry. In his eyes Marcella was loveliness personified. Hence the destruction of her beauty was the destruction of Marcella herself. He might have been prepared for a great deal, but he was certainly not prepared for what he saw. The pitiful vision would haunt him,

would prey upon his mind and dominate his imagination. No one could tell what strange fancies and delusions would possess him, nor what he might do when under the influence of such fancies.

That he had not been killed in the railway accident had now been demonstrated. Dead men could not get away, and it was very unlikely that anyone would carry off the body and hide it. Such a supposition was too foolish to be entertained for a moment. It had only to be mentioned to be discarded.

The only alternative left, therefore, was that he had gone away and hidden himself. To walk away without being noticed was easy enough. The night was thick with fog ; the lanes and fields were deserted ; he might wander for twenty miles without seeing a soul.

But what then—and what motive had he for such conduct ? In his normal mental condition he would never do anything so foolish. He took no luggage with him. His portmanteau was found among the wreckage. On the other hand, it was discovered that he had taken a considerable amount of money

with him, and when his portmanteau was opened by his cousin Sam it was found to contain clothing enough to last him a month.

From these facts Sam came to the conclusion that when he left London he did not intend to return again ; that for some reason or other, best known to himself, he intended to cut the country ; and that later on his bankers—who collected his dividends—would hear from him, perhaps from America or South Africa.

Sam was too afraid of infection to visit Frank Priestley, but he held several conversations with him through the telephone.

“ Was my cousin in any kind of scrape ? ” Sam asked.

“ Not that I am aware of,” Frank replied. “ Why do you suggest such a thing ? ”

“ Well, there is reason for everything—isn’t there ?—if you can only find it.”

“ It is said so.”

“ Consequently there must be a reason for Stephen’s conduct. He took a lot of money and clothes away with him.”

“ You have proved that ? ”

“ Absolutely. Now, the question is,

Why did he do so ? You say he has got into no kind of scrape ? ”

“ Not that I am aware of.”

“ There’s often a woman at the bottom of such things,” Sam went on ; “ and hints have reached me about Stephen becoming infatuated by a pretty face. You knew him well ; were his closest friend, in fact. Now tell me candidly, do you think there is a woman at the bottom of his mysterious disappearance ? ”

“ Will you explain yourself a little more fully ? ” Frank questioned evasively. He did not know Sam Winslow personally, and felt therefore there was need of caution.

“ Well, I mean, had Stephen entangled himself in any way ? Had he made love to any woman, and now discovered his mistake—promised to marry somebody, and now repents his bargain ? ”

“ If such were the case,” Frank answered, “ your cousin was too honourable a man to try to back out of it in such an under-hand way.”

“ Stephen was human, like the rest of us, and his landlady hinted very broadly to me that there was a woman in the case.”

“ Well ? ”

“ To marry, as you must know, would go against Stephen’s conscience.”

“ Not necessarily.”

“ Then he has changed from what he used to be. Anyhow, do you think he had got engaged ? ”

“ I don’t think so.”

“ Did he admire any woman very much ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Did he propose to her and get rejected ? ”

“ I cannot tell, but I don’t think it likely.”

“ Then you believe he meant to return again when he left home ? ”

“ Most certainly I do.”

On the following afternoon Sam rang him up again.

“ I’ve got a new theory,” he explained.

“ Yes ? ” Frank questioned.

“ Stephen has been murdered for his money.”

“ Why do you think so ? ”

“ Nothing more likely. He would be dazed by the collision ; would ramble away through the darkness ; would stumble across some lonely cottage, or fall into the way

of some tramps ; they would rifle his pockets and then bury him."

"He might perish of cold by the roadside."

"In which case his body would have been discovered."

"Unless robbery followed his death, and his body was buried to hide the crime."

"This must be inquired into," Sam said. "If the money he had was in notes, the numbers of the notes should be known at the bank. If those notes have got into circulation, the crime may be traced. I believe I have got on the right trail at last."

Frank's conversations with Sam through the telephone did not tend to lighten in any way his sense of responsibility. The more he thought about the matter the more he became convinced that on the day Stephen started on his journey he was more or less off his mental balance. The shock had been too much for him, and the brooding following upon the shock would complete the work.

"And I might have saved him," Frank would say to himself constantly. "I could have set his mind at rest with a word, and I did not speak it."

He grew at length morbidly sensitive on the point, and blamed himself infinitely more than the occasion demanded.

To make matters worse, it became daily more clear that Marcella was beginning to worry herself about Stephen. He did not write ; he sent no message, no solitary token of his love. Other people sent her flowers and fruit. Kind messages and inquiries reached her constantly. Her brother did not let a day pass without some message of affection and goodwill ; but the man whose wife she had promised to be remained silent. What was the meaning of it ? Had he so soon regretted ? Had the fear that her beauty would be spoiled turned his heart from her ?

She felt her face flame crimson when this thought took possession of her. Could it be possible that he cared only for her face ? That her good looks were her only attraction ?

She longed to make inquiries, and yet somehow she had not the courage. Dr. Frank Priestley came to see her twice every day—sometimes three times. But he never by any chance mentioned Stephen's name.

Indeed, he seemed carefully to avoid every topic of conversation. He was strictly professional, and yet she could not help feeling that he was more than a clever physician—that he was a very dear friend. She had always admired him ; admired his skill, his patience, his sympathy. But now a new element was added to her admiration—the element of gratitude. Frank Priestley had saved her life, and not only her life, but her good looks. What she had dreaded almost more than death had been kept at bay. Dr. Priestley had assured her that not the least shadow of disfigurement would follow her illness—that she would come out of the furnace with no trace of the fire upon her.

“ And all this,” she said to him, with tears in her eyes, “ I owe to you.”

“ No, no ; not to me,” he said quickly. “ To begin with, you had a much less severe attack than some ; then your blood was healthy, and your constitution perfect.”

“ But you have watched my case with infinite patience,” she said.

“ I have done my best, of course,” he answered with averted eyes, “ as I have done my best in every case.”

"Ah! you have worked yourself almost to a shadow," she said sympathetically; "it is quite time you had a rest and change."

"All in good time," he answered with a smile; "just at present I cannot be spared." And without giving her an opportunity for another word, he turned away.

She was getting better rapidly, and the joy of returning health was beginning to thrill her nerves. But for one thing she would be blissfully happy. Stephen remained silent.

She had thought a lot of him during her illness, and her thought had been infinitely sweet. Now that her promise had been given, she could let her heart go out to him without reserve. She felt very thankful that she gave her promise before she fell ill. He would get her letter on the very day she was taken to the hospital. He would be very distressed, of course, and he would pray for her night and day. With his prayers and Dr. Priestley's skill, it was not to be wondered at that she got better. How thankful she ought to be! Her friends had told her that she was giving up her life, but in reality she had found it. Indeed, she had found

more than life ; she had found love as well ; for, of course, she loved Stephen with all her heart. He was so noble, so unselfish, so strenuous, so devoted to all that was good.

The more she thought of him the more worthy he seemed to grow. She saw a score of virtues in him that she had never seen before. She was free to open her eyes now to all his good qualities ; free to open her heart to him without reserve.

It seemed almost wonderful to her how rapidly her love was growing. When Stephen proposed to her she was not quite sure that she loved him at all in any real sense of the word. Of course, that was as it should be. A woman had no right to love a man until he asked her. That might sound a little contradictory and illogical ; but then women were not expected to be logical. Of course, she admired Stephen immensely—had done so from the first. He was so different from the type of men she had met at her brother's house. How proud she ought to be !

So she communed with herself hour after hour. At first with no shadow of misgiving in her heart. Indeed, she fancied her ill-

ness would bind Stephen's heart more closely to her.

But as day after day passed away, and no message came from him, a great and nameless fear began to possess her.

She felt at length that she could bear it no longer. She must speak to Dr. Priestley about it. There was no occasion for diffidence. She was Stephen's affianced wife, and therefore might speak without reserve.

Frank felt what was coming, and avoided any chance of conversation as long as possible. He had become so morbidly sensitive that he was almost afraid to meet her eyes. He knew that it would be difficult to keep back from her one jot or tittle of the truth if once they got upon the theme. He would have stayed away from her altogether if he dared.

She arrested him one afternoon by a point-blank question. It was so sudden and direct that there was no escaping it. For a moment he hesitated; then he dropped slowly into a chair. He would have to face the matter sooner or later. He might as well face it now as any other time.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNJUST JUDGMENT.

“ HAVE you heard anything of your friend lately—I mean Mr. Winslow ? ”

“ Not — very — lately.” Frank spoke slowly and hesitatingly, with his eyes turned away from his questioner.

“ He is quite well, I presume ? ”

“ I hope so.”

“ It is one of the hardships of an illness of this kind that one’s best friends cannot come near.”

“ Mr. Winslow has called once.”

“ Lately ? ”

“ Well, no. He came early on in your illness. We had a long talk together.”

“ He would be very much distressed ? ” and the warm colour came slowly into her face.

“ Yes ; he was greatly troubled.”

“ Oh, I wish I could have seen him—that is, without being seen,” and a look of pain came into her eyes.

"He came with the deliberate intention of seeing you."

"And when I was at the worst?"

"Yes."

"Oh! I am so thankful he did not see me. But—but——" and her face brightened and her eyes sparkled, "in a few days now I shall get away from here, and then——"

"And what then?" he questioned, with a puzzled look on his face.

For a moment she was silent; then she looked up with a radiant smile, and said, "It is only right you should know. You are one of my very best friends, and I owe everything to you—my life even. How shall I ever thank you?"

"Don't try," he said; "I have done no more than my duty."

"I hope we shall always be friends," she went on, closing her eyes. "Always. I am sure I shall never cease to be grateful to you as long as I live."

Then for a moment or two there was silence.

"I think you were going to tell me something?" he questioned at length.

"Oh, yes," and the colour deepened on

her cheeks in a moment. "You will be interested, I know. I have promised Mr. Winslow to be his wife."

For several seconds Frank did not speak or move, but his face grew ashen.

"You have promised to be his wife?" He repeated the words slowly, as if he did not quite comprehend their significance.

"Are you so greatly surprised?" she questioned, looking at him wonderingly.

But he did not reply. His head was bent, his eyes were on the floor, his whole attitude that of a man overwhelmed by some great trouble.

"Oh, I am so sorry," he said at length; and he looked round him appealingly, like a man under sentence of death.

She darted at him a look of pained surprise. "Why are you sorry?" she questioned.

"If I had only known," he replied, as if speaking to himself. "If I had only known!" and he stared beyond her at the blank wall, as though he saw some invisible writing on its white surface.

"I do not understand you," she said,

speaking hurriedly. "What are you referring to?"

He pulled himself together by a tremendous effort, and looked at her.

"You are troubled that Mr. Winslow has sent no message of inquiry lately?"

"I am very much troubled."

"We all are," he said, with averted eyes. "The truth is, no one knows where he is."

"What is that?" she exclaimed.

"Do not excite yourself any more than you can help," he said slowly. "I hope he is all right somewhere."

"All right somewhere? What do you mean?" And she fixed upon him a pair of eager, questioning eyes.

"He took the train to Leeds—let me see, it was on the fourteenth. He was to speak there at a conference of some kind on the fifteenth. It is said he took a considerable sum of money with him, intending to give a large donation as an encouragement to others——"

"Well?" she questioned, seeing he hesitated.

"Well, at a place called Bogstone there

was a railway smash." And then he told her all that the reader already knows.

She listened with tense lips and eager eyes—never once interrupting—and when he had finished there was a moment of silence. She moistened her dry lips once or twice with the tip of her tongue, and her fingers plucked nervously at the coverlet.

"It is quite certain he was not killed?" The words came in painful gasps.

"Quite certain. He could not have been even hurt."

"Why so?"

"Because he must have walked away unaided and of his own free will."

"But why should he walk away? Besides, where would he go to, and for what purpose? And why has he kept silence ever since?"

"Those are questions not easy to answer," he said evasively.

"It seems to me an absurd supposition," she said, with a touch of scorn in her voice. "He was one of the kindest and most self-sacrificing of men, and if he were unhurt himself, instead of running away like a coward, he would have remained to give

help to the wounded and consolation to the dying."

"Under ordinary conditions, yes."

"What do you mean by ordinary conditions?"

"I mean if he were himself. But it is clear to me he was not himself. He was greatly troubled about you——"

"But he believed I would get better?"

"I am not sure. You see, he took the law into his own hands when he came here. I understand it now in some measure. But he gave no hint that you had promised to be his wife."

"What do you mean about taking the law into his own hands?"

"Well, he came to see me after dark. My little house, as you may know, is away from the main building. He said he meant to see you. I told him he must not, and I had no idea he would make the attempt without my permission."

"And did he see me?"

"As it happened, no. But let me tell the story in my own way. It was the day you were removed from the large ward into this room. I had no idea at the time you

had been removed. He asked me for the number of your bed, and I told him."

"Yes."

"Well, instead of going home when he left me, he came straight into the hospital; walked into the large hall unannounced, and made direct for No. 16——"

"Only to find it empty?"

"Alas, no. It was occupied by one of the worst cases we have had."

"But he would discover his mistake in a moment."

Frank Priestley shook his head.

"Do you mean——?" Then a look of consternation, almost of horror, swept over her face.

He looked at her, but did not speak.

"And did he leave the place without being told?" she questioned at length.

"He gave no one the opportunity. The nurses on duty did not know who he was. He came in unannounced, and after looking for several moments at what he supposed was you, he hurried away without a word."

"Did no one speak to him?"

"At the door, yes—just a passing word."

"And when did you get to know?"

“Some hours later.”

“Then you would send word to him of the mistake he had made as soon as possible?”

“Well—no, I did not,” he answered slowly, with downcast eyes.

“When did you send him word then?”

“I sent him no word at all.” He felt he had better make a clean breast of it. He had suffered too much already to desire to hide anything.

“But why?” The words were uttered almost in a whisper.

“I did not know that you had promised to be his wife.”

“But surely——”

“I knew, of course, that he admired you very much,” he interrupted; “but I believed it was your beauty alone that attracted him.”

“And you were willing that he should believe it was gone for ever!”

“Perhaps I was,” he said after a moment of painful silence. “You see, I had been jealous of him for months. I had hoped to win you myself.” The words were out almost before he was aware.

Then followed another pause even more painful than the first.

“You hoped to win me by taking an unfair advantage of your friend?” He was quick to note the tone of quiet scorn in which the words were spoken.

“I did not know that he had proposed to you,” he said humbly.

“And does that make your conduct any the more honourable?”

“He took the law into his own hands. He disobeyed orders. I did not know what the effect of the shock was likely to be. True love should outlive everything.”

“True love will not stoop to meanness—to a suppression of the truth,” she replied scornfully.

“I have no desire to defend myself,” he said, in a tone of gentle dignity. “For the moment I believed I was justified. I am sorry now that I did not send him word.”

“People are often sorry when it is too late.” She spoke quietly, but he saw she was making a tremendous effort to maintain her self-control.

He rose slowly to his feet and turned his head toward the door. He felt that the

interview was becoming intensely painful to both. "We can only hope for the best," he said quietly, and with that commonplace would have ended the conversation.

But she turned upon him furiously ; her eyes flashed, and the hot blood mounted in a torrent to her neck and face.

"So you would heal my broken heart with a platitude," she said. "You, who let my affianced husband drift to despair when a word would have saved him !"

"I did not know he was your affianced husband," he said gently.

"Oh, yes, you can speak now," she went on, "when your words only kill. When your words would have saved you were silent."

He stood with bowed head, but did not reply.

"Oh, I could not have believed it possible of you," she continued. "That you should have played such a part ! You—you ! Oh, leave me, and never let me look on your face again."

"You do not mean that ?" he said, a look of infinite pain coming into his eyes.

"But I do mean it !" she cried. "You



"I HOPE YOU WILL NEVER AGAIN CROSS MY PATH."

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have forfeited all the respect I ever had for you."

"You place me in a very difficult position by such a statement," he replied, without any trace of emotion in his voice. "You see, I am the resident doctor."

"But I shall not need your services again. I am nearly well."

"And you do not wish to see me again?"

"I hope you will never again cross my path." The words came out slowly and deliberately, and with such emphasis that they stung like scorpions.

"As you will," he said quietly. "I will do my best to carry out your wish." And he advanced slowly to the door, turned the handle, and passed out.

She followed him with burning eyes until the door closed behind him; then she lay back on the bed and burst into a tempest of tears.

Another week elapsed before she left the hospital, but Frank did not visit her again, and Marcella had not the moral courage to ask for him.

He caught a glimpse of her face, as she drove away in the company of a nurse to a

South-coast convalescent home ; but he kept himself well out of sight. He was unable to suppress a sigh when the cab disappeared—a sigh partly of gratitude, partly of regret. Gratitude that she had come through her illness with her beauty unimpaired ; regret that the sweetest dream of his life had come to an end ! That she had been unjust in her judgment he felt keenly and bitterly ; that she had been cruel in her punishment he felt no less acutely. Yet he had always a ready excuse for her. His love was so deeply rooted that it would die hard ; and even when it was dead—if that time should ever come—he knew he would still think kindly of her.

CHAPTER X.

MARCELLA'S IDEAL.

EARLY in the new year Marcella returned to her brother's house in Bayswater, looking lovelier, her friends declared, than she had ever done before. During her illness her face had caught a new expression. A softer light had come into her eyes, and a sweeter smile—a smile that was almost pathetic at times—played round the corners of her mouth. It was noticed also that some of her old vivacity and sprightliness had left her. She seemed to be less in evidence. She might be in the house for the best part of a day without anyone being conscious of it. She moved with slower and quieter step, and spoke in a softer tone of voice.

Her brother George imagined that some of the effects of her recent illness still remained—that though she looked so well she was not quite up to normal—and anticipated that a few weeks spent amid the gaieties of

the West End would bring back all the old vim and assertiveness. To his regret, however, Marcella manifested very little desire for company. The doings of society interested her no more than they had done in the past. Her heart was still among those who needed help and sympathy, and her affections gathered round an ideal enshrined in the person of one who had vanished from her sight.

She took no one into her confidence. Her love story was not a subject for idle gossip. It was sacred to herself. No one knew of it except Dr. Priestley, and he, whatever his faults, was not the man to gossip about other people's affairs.

She had given up the hope of ever seeing Stephen again. She had no doubt that he was dead. If he were alive he would come to her, though Hades yawned between. She had pictured him in the first shock of his grief wandering across the country heart-broken and distracted, bemoaning his loss, and wailing to the winds that his love was dead! But she had long since resigned herself to the conclusion that his broken heart was at rest. No shadow of doubt as to his

constancy crept into her mind. She placed him in her gallery of saints and heroes, the greatest of them all. Had she idealised him less it is possible that the logic of facts would have influenced her more ; but, to her imagination, he stood upon a plane far above that occupied by ordinary mortals. His conduct was not to be interpreted by ordinary standards. If he belonged to the rank and file she might have wondered why he sent no gift of fruit or flowers during the long days between her removal to the hospital and his departure for Leeds ; why he had never replied to her letter in any shape or form ; why he stood silent by the bedside in the hospital, speaking no word to the sufferer, when, had he spoken, he would have found out his mistake ; why, after that night, he sent no message of sympathy nor even word of inquiry ; and why he had confided to no one the grief that was breaking his heart.

None of these questions, however, troubled her. From the moment she heard he had disappeared, and was probably dead, she began to idealise him. If anyone had suggested that he had neglected her during the early

days of her illness, she would have had her answer in a moment. Had he not dared all risks and come to the hospital alone—entered the infected ward in spite of warnings and prohibitions—stood by a bedside believing it was her bedside, and looked and looked till his heart broke, and then staggered away speechless and broken, never to lift up his head again? It all seemed to her as clear as noonday—so clear that there was not an inch of room left for cavil or for question.

Whatever might be the manner of his death she had no doubt whatever that he had died heartbroken. Hence, love that could dare so much and suffer so much was of no ordinary kind. It was not the evanescent passion of an unthinking youth; it was the very life of a strong man; and when the blow fell, and he believed the woman he loved could not possibly recover, his life shrivelled up, or, like the flame of a candle in a gust of wind, went out in sudden darkness.

It was all very beautiful and sweet and tender, from her point of view, and none the less beautiful because the idealised Stephen

was very different from the real Stephen. Love always idealises! No lover—at any rate, during the early days of his passion—sees the real and actual. He sees what he wants to see, and sees it, etherealised and glorified. Love is a magic lens which hides the blemishes and magnifies every charm. The pity of it is that the picture produced, like an unfixed photograph, fades in the light.

In those days of tender and pathetic retrospect Marcella wove a halo round Stephen's head. It might be that she was not good enough for him, hence he was removed. Perhaps, if they had married, the care and fret of domestic life would have dragged him down from the high region in which he dwelt. He had struggled against his convictions, she knew, in making love to her at all. Nor did he speak of love until he had satisfied his soul that he was doing right. How different such calm and reasoned conduct from the hurried and breathless passion of an ordinary lover!

So, from whatever standpoint she contemplated the past, Stephen always emerged triumphant, standing in the effulgent light of perfect sainthood, too good for the rough

and tumble of this workaday world ; and worthy of a place among those who had conquered.

Marcella decided that she would not go back again to the scenes of her former labours. In the first place, she saw spheres of usefulness much nearer home ; and in the second place, she was anxious to avoid any chance meeting with Dr. Priestley. It would be very painful—after their last interview—to be brought suddenly face to face with him. Of course, he would cut her dead, and that would be very humiliating, though it would not be anything more than she deserved.

She was much less angry with Frank than at the first, though she still stubbornly refused to look at the matter from his standpoint. The thing that rankled most in her heart was the suggestion that Stephen cared only for her good looks—that he had been fascinated by her face ; but that her real self he neither loved nor understood.

Frank, of course, occupied the standpoint of the ordinary selfish commonplace man—the man without spiritual insight or moral elevation. And though Frank was a very

good man, judged by ordinary standards—very clever, very intellectual, and even very generous—yet he would be unable to understand a man like Stephen simply because his life was pitched to a different key.

She believed now that she had judged Frank too harshly, and was sorry for it. He was not altogether to blame for judging Stephen by his own standard. She ought to have taken into account the different altitudes on which they stood.

Now and then, when she thought of Frank, a curious thrill ran through her heart. However angry she might feel, or imagine she felt, there were a few things she could not forget. It might not be true, as her nurse thought, that he had saved her life; but it was undeniably true that through him no blemish to-day marred her face. That was not a small matter, and if she lived till she was a hundred she would not forget it.

Also, she could not forget that he had confessed that he loved her, and there was a time when, if he had made such a confession, her heart would have leaped in response. And when a man owns that he loves a

woman, she is prepared to forgive him a great deal.

There was no denying also that Frank Priestley was a singularly handsome man ; and good looks count for something, even with women. Nor could she deny to herself that though the young doctor moved on a much less exalted plane than that on which the young clergyman walked, with such firm and certain tread, nevertheless, for ordinary human beings with ordinary passions and emotions, the ordinary walk and the ordinary type might be by far the more congenial.

But it was not often that she allowed such thoughts to occupy her mind. It seemed to her almost a sacred duty that she should record against him constantly that he had not only misjudged her lover, but that he had selfishly and cruelly refused to send him a message that would have kept his heart from breaking, and probably have saved his life.

It is a law of Nature, however, that an emotion that is sustained by effort will soon perish. Neither love nor hate can be whipped for long into vigour ; when the whipping

becomes necessary, the end is inevitable. It was only by continual watchfulness that Marcella maintained her case against Frank Priestley. Moreover, it is a merciful provision of Nature that the dead are soon forgotten ; and Marcella believed that Stephen was dead. How could she believe anything else ? To imagine that he was alive was treason to his memory. If he were alive and able to think or speak or move, he would send some message, would let her know in some way that he still lived, and that he still loved her.

Hence, believing that he was dead, he shared the fate of all dead people. There was very little to keep his memory alive. She did not miss him in the streets of Bayswater, for he had never lived there ; she did not miss his letters, for he had never written to her ; she was never startled and pained by the mention of his name, for her friends had not even heard of him. He had come into her life for a few brief and pleasant months, and had gone out again. Almost on the day she knew she loved him she lost him. There had been no love-making between them, for a cruel fate had intervened

all too soon. There was no sweet memory of what had been, only an imagined picture of what might have been.

Marcella did her best to keep his memory green. She was loyal and chivalrous to her finger tips. Directly the letter was sealed in which she accepted his offer, she put all other dreams aside. It was not her nature to do anything by halves. She let her heart go out to him in its entirety and without reserve, and she had quarrelled with her best friend because he had thrown doubt on her lover's sincerity.

But from that day until now there had been little or nothing for her heart to feed on. No response had come to her letter ; no kiss had sealed their love. But that she had been able to idealise him, and to persuade herself that his love had been so great that the sight of her suffering and the belief that she would die had broken his heart, he would have passed out of her memory and out of her life more rapidly than he did.

As it was, she had to whip her faltering memory and her flagging imagination. She shed tears sometimes because for a whole day she had forgotten him ; because she

had allowed trivial and worthless things to put him out of her heart.

So the days passed slowly away and grew into weeks, and then something happened that changed the whole complexion of her life, that put a new face on Nature, a new note in the roar of the busy streets, a new song of joy in her heart, and, later, a new agony of misgiving.

CHAPTER XI.

A PROSPECTIVE INHERITANCE.

MEANWHILE, Sam Winslow had displayed a larger amount of activity than he had been known to do for years. To prove that his cousin Stephen was dead was the object he had in view, and to this end he went to an amount of trouble that was phenomenal for one of his lethargic disposition. He made several journeys to Bogstone, and discovered, among other things, that within ten miles of the scene of the accident there were several disused coal-pits. There was also an old quarry with fifty feet of water at the bottom. Not five miles from Bogstone was a deep and slowly-moving river, into which any unwary traveller might easily fall, particularly on a dark and foggy night; and finally, there were several woods and plantations with brakes of tangled undergrowth in which a body might be hidden for years. Under these circumstances, Sam came to the con-

clusion that to search for the body of Stephen was like searching for a needle in a bottle of hay. He had evolved in the recesses of his mind several theories, any one of which would sufficiently account for Stephen's disappearance. At the first he was inclined to the belief that there had been foul play. Later on, as he journeyed over the district, he took a more charitable view of the situation, and suggested that Stephen, in the mental confusion that followed the shock of the accident, had unwittingly fallen into a disused coal-pit. Later still, when it was discovered that some of the banknotes that Stephen had taken with him had got into circulation, he came back to the murder theory again ; and finally he concluded that his cousin had died of exposure and shock and cold, but that the individual or individuals who had found the body had appropriated his money, and then had hidden the body to cover up their dishonesty. But each and all of these suppositions led to the same thing—Stephen was dead.

This, from his point of view, was satisfactory as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. What he wanted was evidence

of the fact. No court of law would take such a thing for granted without more definite proof. But how was he to get the proof? And until it was forthcoming, how was he to get hold of his cousin's money?

To prove that he was next of kin was easy. To prove that Stephen had no other near relation in the world was simpler than the multiplication table. To prove that he had never made a will would not require much effort, for no lawyer known to Stephen had drawn up such a document. But to prove that Stephen was dead—that was the crux of the whole difficulty.

Meanwhile, Stephen's fifteen hundreds a year were steadily accumulating at the Bank, and no one was any the better. It was simply maddening to Sam. Here was he, dodging his creditors at all points, driven by his impecuniosity to all kinds of shifts and evasions, seeing vistas of luxury opening up in all directions; and yet, just because Stephen had stupidly and perversely left behind him no proof of his death, he had to remain out in the cold, as it were, standing upon the draughty grid, watching with hungry eyes the people who regaled themselves within.

Sometimes Sam fell to speculating as to whether there might not be a way of manufacturing bogus evidence. Occasionally cases appeared in the papers of dead bodies being found and remaining unidentified. He went to see one such body, and discovered it was that of an old man of seventy.

"No," Sam said to himself, disconsolately ; "I may go on at this game for years, and may end my days in the workhouse."

It did seem very tantalising. To make matters worse, instead of earning he had been spending. He had been using his wits and exhausting his time and strength in an absolutely unremunerative task, and for all he knew Stephen might still be alive, and might turn up at any moment. This suggestion, whenever it crossed Sam's mind, made him hot all over.

One day, early in the new year, a happy thought struck him. Could he not mortgage his probable and prospective claim for a reasonable sum in ready cash ? He calculated that Stephen had at least thirty thousand pounds invested in good security. In case Stephen was dead, all that would come to him in time with accumulated interest.

But while the grass was growing the horse might be starving. What would be the use of thirty thousand pounds to him when he was in his grave? Five thousand pounds might be of more value to him now than seven times that amount seven years hence.

He first went to Stephen's bankers. Would they advance him a few thousands on the strength of his probable and prospective claim?

The manager, however, smilingly shook his head.

"We only do legitimate business," he said in his blandest tones; and Sam had not the courage to ask another question.

He was by no means disposed, however, to give up the idea. There was a money-lender in his district who traded under the name of Isaac Jacobs & Co. He was a man who took large risks for large profits, and generally, it was said, came out on the right side.

Mr. Jacobs was a small man, with a crooked back and a hooked nose. His passion for speculation was part of his nature, and had been developed by long years of practice.

Mr. Jacobs's record was not entirely good,

if reckoned by moral standards. As a matter of fact, he did not recognise any moral standard. The law of the country, he said, was quite moral enough for him ; in fact, it was much too moral. To keep within its four corners was his only concern, and, generally speaking, he succeeded ; for there was no point of law relating to loans, or contracts, or deeds of assignment that he was not as conversant with as any lawyer in the land.

Sam had a grudge against Mr. Jacobs. Several years previously Sam had intended to get married. The lady of his choice—a widow—had several thousand pounds in her own right ; but to tide herself over a temporary difficulty she borrowed a hundred or two of Mr. Jacobs. It took her several years to get out of Mr. Jacobs's hands, by which time she had not a penny left, and Sam refused to marry her.

This circumstance had rankled in Sam's heart ever since. Mr. Jacobs had blighted his affections, and robbed him of years of domestic bliss. To get even, therefore, with the little money-lender would be a great pleasure. He would like to engage him in

a game of wits or a game of chance and worst him. In his present impecunious position Sam felt that he had little or nothing to lose. He could scarcely be worse off than he was at that moment. If there was any luck in the world it ought surely to run in his direction.

Mr. Jacobs received him with a smile that was meant to be winning. Sam assumed an air and manner of great innocence and simplicity.

He wanted a friend, he said ; he wasn't very well off, and he knew little or nothing about the ways of the world. Then he plunged into a recital of his story, and he told it with great directness and ingenuousness.

Mr. Jacobs followed him with great attention, and rubbed his dirty hands together all the time. When Sam had finished Mr. Jacobs looked at him for several moments in silence.

"And you want an advance on the strength of your claim ?" Mr. Jacobs queried, bringing his eyebrows together till they touched.

"That is about the size of it," Sam said bluntly.



"MR. JACOBS RECEIVED HIM WITH A SMILE."

(P. 134.)

"It can't be done, sir ; it can't be done," Mr. Jacobs said plaintively.

"No ?"

"No, sir ; the risk is too great."

"Very good," Sam said ; "then I'll try somewhere else." And he rose suddenly to his feet.

"Ah, you are in too great hurry," Mr. Jacobs said, falling back into his usual manner of speech ; "too great hurry."

"If you can't do it, there's an end to it," Sam said ; "so what's the use wasting your time and my own ?"

"Ah, but I am interested," Mr. Jacobs said ; "I may be able to put you in the way of help. Do you see ? Let me hear more about it."

"There is no more," Sam replied, in his bluntest style. "The case is as straight as a foot-rule."

"But your cousin may be alive."

"I admit it. I have not attempted to hide the risk. There is a chance, say, in ten thousand that he may turn up again, alive and well."

"In which case I should lose everything."

"Exactly. You can't get juice out of a

cork, and shearing pigs for wool is not a paying operation."

"You are very frank."

"Simply because I have nothing to hide. My cousin has left thirty thousand pounds, if he has left a penny. All that will be mine, with the accumulated interest, if I can only wait long enough. But while I'm waiting I'm starving, don't you see?"

"Well?"

"Well, a sovereign to-day may be worth more to me than a five-pound note seven years hence."

"Ah, I see. You would sell the reversion out and out."

"I don't know what a reversion is," Sam answered innocently; "but my idea was that you might be prepared to pay me a lump sum down for the whole thing—lock, stock, and barrel—and take the risk. If my cousin is dead—as no doubt he is—you would come in for the lot in time. If he should turn up alive—well, that's your risk."

Mr. Jacobs pulled at his unkempt beard with his grimy fingers, and looked perplexed. This was the kind of speculation that his

soul delighted in. There was the chance of a big haul by waiting. The question was, how much could he afford to risk on it ?

"I am prepared to consider it," Mr. Jacobs said at length. "Yes, I am prepared to consider it ; but I shall require time."

"How much time ?" Sam asked sharply.

"A week at least. You see, I shall have to verify your story. I shall need proof that you are what you say ; that your cousin leaves as much money as you say ; and that you are his heir, as you say."

"Well, you will have no difficulty in satisfying yourself on all these points," Sam said, in a tone of confidence.

"I do not doubt you for a moment, Mr. Winslow—not for a moment do I doubt you," and he bowed Sam into the street.

A week later Sam called again and found Mr. Jacobs critical and argumentative. Moreover, he had not verified all the facts, and Sam left, considerably chagrined and crest-fallen.

A few days later Sam called again, and found the money-lender a little less inclined to raise obstacles, but not prepared to make any definite offer.

On the occasion of his fourth visit Sam lost his temper.

"Look here, Mr. Jew," he said ; "either we do a deal to-day or we don't, and, mind you, if we don't, you will not have another chance. For I have discovered a man in the City who is quite keen on the job."

"That is not true," Mr. Jacobs replied. "I do know all the City men."

Sam sprang to his feet and made for the door, but Mr. Jacobs was after him in a moment.

"No, you must not go," he said ; "we can do business if you will be reasonable."

"I've been reasonable all along," Sam retorted angrily. "It is you who persist in playing the fool." Sam's anger was so well simulated that even the Jew was deceived.

"Ah, well. Now let us talk quietly. I have made inquiries, for I have agents in all parts of London. I admit your story is true. But your cousin may turn up. It is only two months since he disappeared. The risk is very great."

"No, not *very* great. There is a risk, I admit. In that risk you have your chance.

How much will you stake on the chance of winning, say, forty thousand pounds ? ”

“ No, not forty thousand.”

“ It will be if it runs on a few years.”

“ There will be legal expenses,” Mr. Jacobs said querulously. “ Those assignments have to be drawn up with the greatest care. There must be no risk on any point of law. You understand ? ”

“ Quite. Make the deed as fast as you like.”

“ Then what do you say to —— ? ” And he named a sum.

“ You insult me ! ” Sam said, springing out of his chair. “ Make it twice the amount, and I will consider it.”

Mr. Jacobs protested, and they hammered the pros and cons for the best part of an hour. Finally they compromised.

“ In three days the documents shall be ready for your signature,” said Mr. Jacobs blandly. “ In three days the money shall be yours ” ; and he sighed.

Sam walked away from the money-lender’s house in a state of great nervous excitement. It was a big sum of money he was to receive if——

“ Oh, hang the ‘ ifs ’ ! ” he said petulantly.

But the “ if ” still followed him.

Stephen might not be dead. Stephen might appear on the scene within the next few days. He felt as though he was walking on the edge of a volcano. He had been positive that Stephen was dead before. He was less positive now.

“ Great Scot ! ” he said. “ If he should turn up ! ”

CHAPTER XII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

By the end of February Frank Priestley was back again at the General Hospital, and was devoting all his spare time to research work. He was not unhappy. Like most other men, he had his moments of depression, and now and then a spasm of regret swept across his heart. But he was too healthily constituted to brood over-long. There were things he regretted, of course, and had he his life to live over again he would do some things differently and leave undone others. But as he could not alter the past by even a hair's-breadth, he wisely resolved not to let it trouble him any more than he could help.

He had his work, and he loved it. It was constantly revealing to him fresh fields of interest. The further he advanced the more fascinated he became. He was specialising, as most clever physicians do—not because he was ambitious to make a name or

anxious to secure a large income, but because his researches lured him on with a fascination he could not resist.

Now and then he wondered what had become of his old friend Stephen Winslow. That he was dead Frank stubbornly refused to believe. Moreover, he felt fully convinced that sooner or later Stephen would turn up again, alive and well. In that belief, however, he stood alone. Everyone with whom he discussed the subject had come to the same conclusion—that Stephen would never be heard of again. Even Stephen's vicar had given way at length to what he called the logic of facts.

It was soon after Frank's return to the "General" that he called round one evening to have a talk with Mr. Mayne about his late curate.

"No, doctor," the vicar said, with a pathetic tone in his voice, "I've come to the conclusion that I shall never see Winslow again; and, what is more, I shall never see his like again."

"He was very devoted to his work," Frank said absently.

"And that was not the whole of it,"

Mr. Mayne responded. "He worked for nothing, and that, in a poor and crowded parish, means a great deal."

Frank concluded that it meant a great deal to the vicar, but did not say so.

"I held on to the hope as long as possible that he would turn up again," the vicar continued; "but it's no use, doctor. It was November when he left; it's now February."

"But he may be still alive," Frank said. "He was suffering from depression when he went away. The shock of the collision may have unbalanced his mind——"

"I have thought of all that," the vicar interrupted. "Mother and Grace and I have discussed it all ends up. No; time and facts are against us."

"I admit——" Frank began, but before he could complete the sentence the door was thrown open, and Grace seemed to fill the room.

"You have met my daughter before, I think?" the vicar said interrogatively.

"No, I have not had that pleasure," Frank said, with a moral twinge at the last word, for he remembered how

Stephen once told him that she was a terror.

"Ah! then let me introduce you," the vicar said, beaming all over his thin face. "My daughter Grace—Dr. Priestley. And the best daughter in the world, and the image of her mother to boot."

"Oh, father!" Grace said in a tone of reproach, and blushed becomingly.

Frank did not agree with Stephen. His first impression of Grace was decidedly favourable. There was certainly a little too much of her, and there were indications that there would be more of her in the near future. But, on the other hand, her face was comely, her complexion good, her smile radiant and expansive, and her temper untouched by querulousness.

"We were talking about the chances of Mr. Winslow turning up alive when you came in," the vicar said in a tone of apology. "Dr. Priestley thinks that some day he may appear amongst us again."

"Do you really think so?" Grace said eagerly, and with heightened colour.

"At any rate, I have not quite given up hope," Frank replied.

“ But is there any solid ground for hope ? ” And he noticed that she locked her hands tightly together.

“ It seems to me there is always ground for hope while you have no clear evidence of his death,” and he glanced at her with an added interest.

The colour came and went on her cheeks like shadows on a landscape on a windy April day.

“ But supposing he is still alive ? ” she asked after a long pause. “ How do you account for his silence ? ”

“ Well,” Frank said uneasily, “ I can only account for it in one way, and that by loss of mental balance caused by a shock or successive shocks. You know that he was not quite himself when he left home.”

“ Tell me,” she said eagerly, and the blood rushed in a torrent to her neck and face, “ do you believe he was distressed about Miss Dacre ? ”

“ Why do you ask ? ” he questioned evasively.

“ Well, there has been so much talk, you know. Some people have been so foolish as to say that her illness turned his brain.”

"There is no accounting for gossip, Miss Mayne."

"No; and yet one sometimes wonders whether in so much talk there may not be some measure of truth."

"He would be sorry on Miss Dacre's account, no doubt."

"But you do not believe he was engaged to her?"

"If he was, he made no mention of the fact in his conversations with me. In fact, whenever the subject of matrimony came up he expressed the opinion strongly that clergymen should not marry."

"Oh, that was merely a young man's fad, which he would grow out of," and her face became almost crimson again.

"I agree with you as to the 'fad' part of the business," he said, with a laugh; "though it is one that a great many clergymen—or priests, as they call themselves—never grow out of."

"Oh, I have no patience with them," she said with a pout and a laugh. "Ministers ought to be men, and live the lives of men, knowing the world and understanding the needs of their kind."

"I quite agree with you," he said. "I have told Winslow again and again that he would never be a fully equipped minister until he had a wife and children of his own."

"And did he agree with you?"

"Not exactly, though I think his creed was wearing thin in places."

"I should like to think his work is not yet done," she said, with a little sigh; and then Frank rose to take his departure.

He made his way very slowly back to the hospital, and when he got to his own room he threw himself into an easy chair before the fire and lighted a pipe. He was in no humour for work. His conversation with the vicar and his daughter Grace had raised all the old questions, and, when once raised, like uneasy ghosts, they could not be exorcised again.

For many weeks the name of Marcella Dacre had never passed his lips, and he had done his best to put her out of his thought and out of his life. But to-night Grace Mayne had brought up her name again, and compelled him to think of her.

For a long time he stared at the fire, pulling at his pipe intermittently.

“Poor Grace!” he said to himself at length, and sighed. He felt that there was a common bond of sympathy between them. A common trouble touched their hearts; a fellow-feeling made them kind.

Grace might never guess that he loved Marcella Dacre, for he flattered himself that he was able to hide his feelings with more success than she could do; but that she loved Stephen Winslow there could be no doubt whatever. It was the comedy and tragedy of life going hand in hand. The wrong cards had been dealt, the wrong partners chosen. It was a game of cross purposes—comedy in the playing, and tragedy as the sequel.

He felt sorry for Grace, because he felt sorry for himself. He had suffered pain enough to sympathise with her. Why Stephen should think her a terror he could not imagine. She would make a splendid wife—bright, cheerful, good-tempered, and domesticated. And yet, because fate chose to be ironical or malicious, all her good qualities might run to waste. The instincts of wifhood and motherhood might find no outlet, and the latent worth and devotion of this optimistic

soul might be smothered in obscurity and neglect.

If Stephen had only been drawn to Grace as he had been to Marcella, what a different place the world would be for several people ! But evidently it was not to be. The little imp of fate would not allow it. The game of cross purposes was too interesting to be omitted from the play. Tragedy is the keynote of all human life.

And yet the comedy of it all almost made him laugh. Two women pining for one man, and that man Stephen ; two men striving for one woman, and the one who neither understood nor appreciated her getting the preference. The man who dwelt in the spiritual realm caring only for the material, and the so-called materialist loving the woman for the beauty of her soul.

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe at length, and looked at his watch.

"The post is late to-night," he said to himself.

A moment later a knock came to the door, and a porter entered with quite a heap of letters on a tray.

"Thank you, Wills," he said. "I sup-

pose there have been no inquiries for me ? ”

“ No, sir ; not that I know of.”

“ Thanks.” And Wills retired, closing the door softly behind him.

Frank adjusted the shade of his lamp, and began to turn over his letters before opening them. Some were merely puffs with halfpenny stamps on them, and he flung them impatiently on the table.

He had reached the last of the little pile, when he gave a sudden start. The letter bore a Nottingham post-mark. That fact, however, did not interest him. It was the handwriting that blanched his face.

“ Surely I cannot be mistaken,” he said, with a gasp. “ It is Stephen’s handwriting,” and with trembling hands he tore open the letter and began to read.



“‘IT IS STEPHEN’S HANDWRITING.’”

(p. 150.)

CHAPTER XIII.

OBSESSED.

WHAT the shock at the hospital began the shock of the railway smash completed. Stephen Winslow extricated himself from the wrecked carriage without much difficulty ; but what had happened seemed by no means clear. What he was chiefly conscious of was a vague feeling of terror and an eager desire to escape from some impending calamity. Around him was a confused medley of sounds—the hissing of steam, the cracking of burning wood, mingling with the moans and cries of the wounded, and the shouts of those who were hurrying to their rescue.

But he had no desire to lend a helping hand ; was not conscious, in fact, that help was needed. His one desire was to get away. Something was pursuing him—something awful ; but what it was he could not define. But whatever it was, it represented the

vengeance of God. He had a vague idea that he had done something wrong—that in some way he had betrayed his trust ; that he had been unfaithful to what he believed ; and now he was hastening to a city of refuge that he might escape the just judgment of God.

The hissing steam from the wrecked engines appalled him. It seemed the fierce breathing of his pursuers. The lights here and there were the flashing eyes of vengeance ; his executioners were shouting for his death.

Physically he was unharmed—at least, he was not conscious of bruise or cut. He had come out of the catastrophe unscathed ; and yet, for the moment, without knowing it, he was almost as great a wreck as the train itself.

To get over the rail fence into an adjoining field was the work of a minute, and then, pulling his hat over his eyes, he walked away over the crunching snow into the darkness. He had no idea of the direction he was taking. All around him was black, impenetrable night. That, however, did not trouble him ; it rather comforted him, and imparted a vague sense of security. The sounds became

more and more faint ; the lights were blotted out in the appalling darkness ; his pursuers had given up the chase.

The fog lifted a little after a while, and he found himself in a well-defined road. The sense of terror was dying gradually out of his heart ; yet he never paused for a moment in his tramp. He was still escaping from something, though what it was he could not quite comprehend.

The wind got up after awhile, and the fog vanished as if by magic. Later on, the stars came out and gleamed frostily for awhile. Then clouds began to gather, and soon after cool flakes of snow kissed his cheeks and got into his eyes, and rested complacently on his ears.

He was not conscious of weariness, whilst the exercise kept him warm. So for nine or ten hours he kept up the tramp, and then he discovered that he was nearing a town, and that a new day was struggling to reveal itself in the eastern sky.

His pace was much slower by this time. He was much nearer physical exhaustion than he knew. The road at length became a street ; a man appeared and put out the

lamps. Right and left doors were thrown open, and workmen emerged and hurried away in front of him. Carts and lorries began to rattle over the cobbled street.

He still pressed on. The daylight steadily increased. Cottages gave place to shops. He found himself at length in a broad thoroughfare, with tram-lines down the centre. Then he paused before an open door, over which was painted "Temperance and Commercial Hotel." A boy was scouring the door-handle, and an untidy-looking maid was washing the passage floor.

After a moment's hesitation he entered, and was shown into a shabbily-furnished room, made cheerful, however, by a big fire in the grate. He ordered some breakfast in a slow, mechanical fashion.

"Tea or coffee?" said the maid.

"Tea, please."

"Yes?"

"Some bacon and eggs."

Then he dropped into an easy chair and stared into the fire. His brain had begun to clear a little, but he was still in a condition of painful bewilderment. Where he was he

did not know, and what he intended to do was a mystery.

His breakfast was served at a small table near the fire. He drew up his chair, and poured out his tea mechanically. If there were any other visitors in the hotel they had not yet put in an appearance.

By the time he had finished his breakfast he became conscious of his own identity, but there came, along with that consciousness, an eager desire to hide it from other people. He must let no one know who he was or what he had done.

While waiting for his bill he opened a copy of the *Yorkshire Post*, and the first thing that met his eye in startling headlines was an announcement of the railway collision at Bogstone. He read the account through carefully, with knitted brows, and a troubled and questioning light in his eyes.

He remembered the collision now. He was going to Leeds ; but he was not allowed to reach his destination. And then a spasm of the old terror swept over him : God was punishing him for his unfaithfulness, for his disloyalty to what he had held to be true.

Then he thought of Marcella. He had

been captivated by a beautiful face. He had been prepared to sacrifice everything at the shrine of physical beauty, and God had smitten that face with deformity. What was he to do? He thought of what he had seen in the hospital, and shuddered. Could he spend his life in the company of one who had been robbed of what alone he prized? And yet he had asked her to be his wife!

He shuddered again as the vision of what he had seen came back to him.

"No, no," he said, pressing his hands to his temples; "it cannot be—it would be torture. I should go mad."

Then he rose suddenly to his feet as a new thought crossed his mind.

"She did not accept my offer," he said, staring round him with a bewildered air. "Let me think—let me think! No, no; she did not accept, and therefore I am not bound."

He sat down again, and the tears came into his eyes. He felt weak, and nervous, and hysterical.

"I cannot go back," he said to himself. "God has driven me into the wilderness

that I may repent and turn to Him. I have sacrificed the spirit for the flesh. I have let the human face obscure the Divine. Until I am purged from my iniquity He will not hear me."

When the girl brought his change she eyed him curiously. He had sat there all the time with the collar of his overcoat turned up, and a cowering look upon his face.

"Shouldn't be surprised if he hasn't been up to any good," she reflected, as he hobbled slowly out of the room. "He's got a hang-dog look that I don't like."

Stephen felt uncomfortable under the girl's scrutiny. The fear of being recognised was becoming a mania. He would have to disguise himself.

A little way down the street he paused before a ready-made clothing establishment.

"I have it," he muttered to himself, and a smile played over his face. He turned down his collar and revealed his clerical vest and coat. Then marched boldly into the shop.

"I want a ready-made suit of clothes for a man who is just my size," he said to

the shopman. "Something rough and warm, and not too expensive."

"We allow a discount to clergymen who are buying clothes for charitable purposes," the assistant explained.

"Ah! that is good. Perhaps I may be tempted to buy two suits."

The assistant was politeness itself. Boots, ties, linen, underwear, were shown and purchased.

Stephen would not have the parcel sent to any address. He would fetch it or send for it later in the day.

"Curiously absent-minded clergyman that," the shopman reflected, as Stephen walked out into the street. "Might be a bit wrong in the upper storey."

Stephen got cheap lodgings that night near the station, and next day he took train to a town a hundred miles away. He wore a bowler hat, a lounge suit of grey tweed, a stand-up collar, and a red necktie. He laughed when he saw his reflection in the glass. "My cousin Sam would not recognise me now," he said to himself.

He had a fixed idea in his mind that he must cut himself clean away from the past.

It was God's will. It was part of the punishment he had to undergo. He must make a fresh start under fresh conditions. It was the only way by which he could be reinstated into the favour of God. He had done wrong in the past, had worshipped the flesh, had apostasised from the faith, had degraded the ministry. And God had shown His anger in unmistakable fashion. First by disfiguring the human face he had worshipped, and second by not allowing him to go to Leeds to advocate the cause of missions, which he professed to have so much at heart.

The more he thought about the matter the more completely it dominated him. It obsessed his mind to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Why he chose Nottingham as the place in which to begin his new life he did not know. He was moved by impulse rather than reason. In counting his money he came to the conclusion that he had enough to carry him over the greater part of a year if he never earned a penny, by which time he might be allowed to take up the work again that he had laid down.

He made all his plans with great care.

Indeed, he exhibited in many things a species of cunning. He destroyed as far as possible every clue that might lead to his identity. He called himself John Winter. The name seemed appropriate, and was easily remembered. He got cheap lodgings with an old couple, who were anxious to add a few shillings a week to their slender income, and who treated him with as much affection as if he had been their son.

He gave them very little trouble ; was prompt in all his payments ; and, what pleased them better than all, he appeared to be deeply religious.

So a fortnight passed away, and then he was run down by a motor-car and taken to the hospital, suffering from concussion of the brain, a broken leg, and dislocated shoulder, to say nothing of sundry cuts and bruises.

The house surgeon who examined him shook his head. There was just a chance that he might pull through, but the chance was an exceedingly slender one.

CHAPTER XIV.

EXPLANATIONS.

“COME to me at once,” the letter began. “I have been here three months, and have suffered what no tongue can tell. But I am recovering rapidly, and shall soon be all right again. Don’t tell anyone you have received this letter ; let me see you first. I have so much to talk about. Inquire for John Winter. I shall be impatient till I see you. Don’t tarry if you can avoid it.

“Yours affectionately,

“STEPHEN.”

Frank took in the purport of the letter at a glance. Then he read it through a second time more carefully, and as he did so a pained and puzzled look came into his eyes.

“Why this secrecy ? ” he said to himself. “And why has he changed his name ? ”

There was clearly more behind the letter than appeared on the surface. He slept

very little that night. A hundred questions kept revolving in his mind, and every door of memory stood wide open. He was thankful that Stephen was alive—intensely thankful. At last the mystery of his disappearance was solved. But what would his coming back to St. Timothy mean? What would be his relation to Marcella?

He was still like the fabled dog in the manger. He could not have Marcella himself, and yet he shrank instinctively from the idea of any one else marrying her. While she remained unloved and unappropriated, he did not mind so much; he could bear his pain and disappointment with comparative equanimity. But the thought of her giving to another what she denied to him, and what he had longed for above all earthly things, was like the fang of a serpent, piercing his very heart.

“It is very foolish of me,” he reflected, “and very selfish. True love ought not to think of itself. If she is made happy, why should I repine?” But somehow this exalted philosophy failed to satisfy him.

His love was not so unselfish that he could rejoice in another man carrying off

what in his soul he felt belonged to him. He discovered now what he had never realised before, that there had been in his heart all the time a distinct sense of compensation in Stephen's strange disappearance and long silence.

Now, however, the real tragedy of his life would have to be faced. Stephen would come back ; Marcella, with eager and impatient joy, would rush into his arms ; the public would be informed of their engagement, and then his little romance would end for ever. People would applaud, and approve, and smile, and send congratulations, and be quite oblivious of the fact that two hearts ached with unrelieved pain, that he and Grace Mayne would walk in shadow for the rest of their lives.

He fell asleep at length, and did not open his eyes again until the light of a new day began to steal into his room.

It was not so easy to get away from the hospital for a single day ; but he was determined that nothing should prevent him if he could help it. By noon the way was clear, and, jumping into a hansom, he drove rapidly away to St. Pancras. At Nottingham he

got into another cab, and drove direct to the hospital. He felt strangely excited—much more excited, he told himself, than the occasion warranted.

He told the porter that he had come to see John Winter, and his name was at once sent upstairs. For several minutes he waited very impatiently, and then a nurse took him in tow, and piloted him through no end of passages and corridors.

“I am glad you have come to see him,” the nurse said on the way, “for he appears to have no friends in the town.”

“He has not many friends in the world,” Frank answered evasively.

“I guessed as much. Of course, for a long time he was quite unconscious, and even after he came to himself the doctors feared that his brain was permanently injured. However, he has almost completely recovered. In a day or two he will be able to leave.”

“Did he meet with an accident of some kind?” Frank queried. “For, really, in the note he sent to me he told me nothing.”

“Oh, yes; he was knocked down by a motor. But, really, I don’t think it was anyone’s fault but his own. The people with

whom he lodged said he was terribly absent-minded. He appeared to have been crossing the street in a kind of day-dream, taking no notice of anything. The driver sounded his horn and people shouted, but he took no notice. But here we are. He has been expecting you all day, and in this little room you will be able to talk undisturbed."

"It is very kind of you——" Frank began, and then the door was thrown open, and Stephen stood before him.

For a moment Frank stared, and an uneasy feeling stole over him that there had been some mistake. Could this be Stephen—this bearded man in a grey tweed suit?

But directly Stephen spoke all his misgivings vanished. However much the outward man had changed, the voice remained the same.

"I am so glad you have come," Stephen said tremulously. "I thought you would not fail me," and he took Frank's hand and drew him into the room.

"We can talk unmolested here," he went on, "and there is so much I want to say to you."

"Yes?" Frank replied interrogatively,

and he dropped into a basket chair by the window.

"Were you greatly surprised to get my letter?" Stephen questioned, taking a chair directly opposite him.

"Ye—s, and no," was the hesitating reply.

"You believed I was alive somewhere?"

"I did. I never gave up the hope that sooner or later you would turn up again."

"And has that been the general feeling?"

"Oh, no. As a matter of fact, people have almost ceased to talk about you. It is taken for granted that you will never be heard of again."

"Then my return, if I do return, will produce something of a sensation?"

"What do you mean by that query?" Frank asked in a tone of surprise.

"Ah! that is one of the points we will have to discuss. The truth is, I am still uncertain what to do for the best."

"But why?"

"Well, it is only fair to tell you that I deliberately concealed my identity—of course, I was not altogether responsible for my

actions, and yet I knew well enough what I was doing ? ”

“ Yes ? ” Frank questioned.

“ You see, I had received a terrible shock, not only mental, but emotional. The nurses would no doubt tell you that I went into the hospital after I left you.”

“ They did.”

“ I ought not to have gone. I was not prepared for what I saw. It was horrible—simply horrible. It haunted me. It filled my dreams. It seemed to stab my brain with red-hot needles. You see, I had asked her to marry me.”

“ So I understand.”

“ Who told you ? ”

“ She told me.”

“ She recovered, then ? I wondered if she could possibly recover.”

“ The case you saw died next morning. Marcella had been removed without my knowledge into a room by herself.”

“ Then, it was not Marcella I saw ? ”

“ No.”

For a moment Stephen was silent, and he looked abstractedly out of the window. Frank watched him narrowly, and wondered

what was passing through his mind. He did not seem overwhelmingly relieved by the news he had heard. Did he care for Marcella in any real sense, or was it simply her beauty that had attracted him? The old questions would obtrude themselves again.

"Then Marcella is less disfigured than——" Then he paused, and looked abstractedly out of the window again.

Frank grew almost angry, and he answered, sharply enough: "I have never seen her since she left the hospital. You had better find out for yourself."

Stephen did not reply for several seconds. He continued to look out of the window, but a pained and troubled expression came into his eyes.

"I may not be able to justify my conduct altogether," he said at length, in a plaintive tone. "But you can understand how upset I was. Then came the railway smash, which completely stunned me. Believe me, I was not myself. My one idea was to get away from some great horror that was pursuing me. So I tramped through the fog and darkness till daybreak."

"And you came to yourself then?"

“ In a sense I did. At least I was able to think and reason with a fair degree of clearness.”

“ Then why did you not return home, and put an end to the anxiety of your friends ? ”

“ I ought to have done so, no doubt ; but I was a coward. I feared to face the fate that I had prepared for myself.”

Frank’s lips curled slightly, but he did not speak. Moreover, he felt it would not be fair to blame Stephen too much. It was clear enough that the double shock had completely unhinged him.

“ I had a feeling,” Stephen went on, “ that God had driven me into the wilderness to purge me and punish me on account of my sin.”

“ What sin ? ” Frank demanded sharply.

“ The sin of apostacy. The sin of loving the human more than the divine—the sin of letting a beautiful face hide the Eternal vision. You know how I once railed against the clergy who married.”

“ I have not forgotten,” Frank said, slowly.

“ Ah, well,” Stephen went on, “ the

terror of having done some great wrong, and of some awful disaster approaching me in consequence, dominated every other feeling. I thought God in anger had smitten the face that had charmed me, and spurned the offering that I was going to give to the mission cause. Hence there seemed nothing for me but to wait in silence till His anger was overpast."

"And has that feeling continued?"

"Oh, no. But it passed away very slowly."

"And what now?"

"During the last week or two, while I have lain here fighting my way back to health and strength, I seem to have got a new vision of God and of life and duty."

"Yes?"

"When the stars have looked through my window in the quiet of the night, I have said to myself: 'Can He who made the planets and swung the worlds in space care for the petty things that we fight and squabble about—our candles, and vestments, and incense? What He cares for is righteousness of life.'"

"Yes. Go on."

“Around me have lain the sick and dying—men of all creeds and opinions—Catholics, Churchmen, and Nonconformists. Did it matter what our views were on this dogma or that, on this theory or the other? The bottom rock on which we all rested was the infinite mercy of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.”

“Well?”

“So, slowly and almost imperceptibly, my mind has grasped a wider truth, my eyes have seen a clearer vision, my heart has been touched by a broader charity. I shall wrangle no more about stoles, and chasubles, and positions. To do good and live purely—that is the sum of all religion.”

“And what about the future?” Frank questioned after a pause.

“Ah! that is a matter on which I wish you to help me with your advice.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE WANDERER RETURNS.

“THIS is a matter on which you should need no advice,” Frank said at length, when Stephen had further explained himself. “There is only one possible course open to you.”

“You think so?”

“Well, what else can I think? As a preacher of righteousness you must do righteously.”

“Yes, yes; that is what I am most anxious to do,” Stephen said plaintively. “And yet it is so difficult to know sometimes what is for the best.”

“Never mind what is best,” Frank replied a little impatiently. “You of all men should look farther. And, after all, the best thing for every man is the right thing. I’ve lived long enough to find that out.”

“And you think the right thing for me is to go back and begin again?”

“Of course it is. Start where you left off. Pick up the threads you let drop, and go ahead as though there had been no break.”

Stephen shook his head. “I fear that is not possible,” he said.

“Why not? The place is still open. Mr. Mayne would welcome you with effusion. Your poor people would heap benedictions on your head. Besides, you would be able to do better work. You would go back with clearer vision, with enlarged sympathies, and with a broader charity.”

For several moments Stephen was silent; then he said, with half-closed eyes and a little unsteadiness in his voice: “And do you think I should propose to Marcella again?”

“Propose to her again?” Frank said, aghast. “What do you mean? You have proposed to her once and she has accepted you. Why, in the name of commonsense, should you propose to her again?”

Stephen opened his eyes wide and stared at Frank.

“Did—she—tell—you—that?” he said at length, bringing out the words in jerks.

“Tell me that she had accepted you?”

"Yes."

"Why, of course she did," Frank answered impatiently. "Had you forgotten it?"

But Stephen was silent, and a look of perplexity came into his eyes. Either Marcella's answer had never reached him or he had forgotten it. But if she had told Frank Priestley that she had accepted him, that was enough. His way seemed quite clear now.

"You say you have not seen Marcella lately?" he questioned after a pause.

"Not since she left the hospital."

"Then she has not come back to the settlement?"

"No. I am told she has found other work nearer home."

"And she is living with her brother."

"I believe so."

"Was she greatly distressed about me?"

"Naturally. How could she help it? The wonder to me is, you were not more distressed about her."

"But I was distressed," Stephen said hastily. "Heaven knows I was. I am dis-

tressed still. I shall never cease to mourn. She was so fair to look upon."

Frank rose from his seat and smiled grimly. "You had better go to her at once," he said. "Why not return with me to-night?"

"No, not to-night," he said in a tone of alarm. "You must prepare the way for me."

"Do you mean that I must inform Marcella?"

"No, no. But you might tell Mrs. Billing. Even if she has let my rooms she will take me in, I know."

"And when will you come back?"

"To-morrow, or the day following."

"All right; I will advise Mrs. Billing. If I can catch the next train I shall get back soon after tea. Good-bye. I will look you up in a day or two." And with a hasty shake of the hand he was gone.

There was a light burning in Mrs. Billing's dining-room when he reached her door, so he dismissed his cabman and gave the bell a vigorous pull.

The door was opened by Mrs. Billing herself, who was evidently on the point of going to bed.

“Why, Dr. Priestley,” she exclaimed, in a tone of alarm, “whoever would have thought of seeing you this time of night?”

“I have just returned from Nottingham,” he said. “May I come in?”

“Why, of course you may,” she said, with a questioning note in her voice. “You must be nearly perished with cold.”

“Oh, not at all,” he said cheerily. “The carriages were well warmed. But I have some important news for you.”

“For me?”

“For you and several other people. Don’t imagine it’s a case of money. It isn’t that. Nothing so prosaic, I can assure you. The truth is, I’ve returned from seeing Mr. Winslow.”

Mrs. Billing gave a gasp, then dropped into the nearest chair.

“I’ve always believed he was alive somewhere,” Frank went on, “and as it happened I was right.”

“But why—how—where—that is——” Mrs. Billing began, with a look of wonder in her eyes.

“Oh, it is a very short and simple story,” Frank interrupted with a laugh. “He was

dazed by the railway smash at Bogstone, as I expected, and then, to make matters worse, he got run down by a motor-car and nearly killed ; the wonder is he has pulled through. However, he is nearly well again."

"But he might have let somebody——"

"Oh, he was unconscious for I don't know how long," Frank said, interrupting her. "The point is, can he come back here again?"

"Why, of course he can. His rooms are just as he left them. I've never found another lodger as just suited me."

"That's all right, then. I expect he'll be turning up to-morrow or the day following."

"Deary me alive!" Mrs. Billing said, staring blankly at the fire. "It'll be like one comin' back from the dead almost."

"And just a word of advice. Don't ask him too many questions. He's forgotten a few things, and shouldn't be worried."

"I s'pose he's all right in his 'ead?" Mrs. Billing queried in a tone of alarm.

"As right as you are, Mrs. Billing; but he's had a long illness, and is still very weak. Besides, a man can't be smashed up in a

railway accident, and afterwards by a motor-car, without getting his nerves a bit upset."

"Well, no, sir; that sounds reasonable," Mrs. Billing admitted.

"Get his bed well aired, and put a fire in his room first thing to-morrow morning."

"Trust me, sir," Mrs. Billing said with energy. "And there's such a heap of letters as comed for him after he left, and a new suit of clothes. I've never had the heart to do nothing with 'em."

"He'll be glad to get back again," Frank replied, and with a hasty good-night he took his departure.

He pulled out his watch when he reached the first lamp. It was only just after eleven. An empty cab was passing.

"I'll risk it," he said. "The vicar is not usually an early bird."

He hailed the cab and jumped in. "Drive me to St. Timothy's Vicarage," he said, "and be quick about it."

The house was dark, save for a light in a single window on the first floor.

For a moment or two he hesitated; then he pulled the door-bell gently, and waited. At first he thought there would be no re-

sponse, but a little later he heard the shuffling of feet in the passage ; then a voice sounded gruffly through the key-hole : “ Who’s there ? ”

“ Dr. Priestley,” Frank answered back. “ Are you Mr. Mayne ? ”

But the answer to that was the shooting back of bolts, and a moment later the vicar stood in the doorway.

“ Come in, doctor,” he said, in a tone of anxiety. “ I hope nothing is amiss.”

“ I have some news for you—that’s all,” Frank answered.

“ Come up into my study,” the vicar said briskly. “ My wife’s away, all the others are in bed and, I expect, asleep. I was having a quiet read.”

“ I won’t keep you long,” Frank said, as he mounted the stairs, “ and I shall be busy all to-morrow.”

“ Don’t apologise. Now take this easy chair and warm yourself. I hope you bring good news.”

“ Yes, I think so. You remember our last conversation respecting the chances of Winslow being alive ? ”

“ Well ? ”

"As it happened, I was right."

"You have received proof that he is living?"

"I have seen him to-day."

"Seen him?"

Frank turned his head suddenly toward the door, for a sound like a stifled cry fell distinctly on his ear.

The vicar heard it also, for he went at once and opened the door.

"Grace!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were in bed."

"Pardon me, father," she replied in gasps, "but I heard the door-bell, and then I heard Dr. Priestley's voice——"

"And so you came to hear the news, eh?"

"I thought he might have bad news."

"Oh, well, don't worry yourself. Go back to bed. He has brought good news. It seems that Mr. Winslow is alive, after all."

"Yes, father, but is he well?"

"He has been very ill," Frank called, "but he is nearly all right again. I expect he will be back in his old diggings to-morrow or the day following."

"Oh, thank you—thank you very much." And with a long-drawn sigh she turned back into her own room.

"I think Grace has nearly all the sympathy of the family," the vicar said apologetically, as he closed the door. "Now, doctor, let me have all the story."

It was long after midnight when Frank left the vicar's warm and cosy study, and even then he had not answered all the vicar's questions.

On the following day but one Stephen reached London. No one knew of the time of his arrival; consequently no one was at St. Pancras to meet him. He had timed his journey so as to reach his old diggings a little after dark. He was dressed in a grey tweed suit with a bowler hat, but his beard had been shaved off, so that he looked a little more like his old self.

Mrs. Billing had been on the *qui vive* for two whole days, and was ready to go into hysterics on the smallest provocation.

Before the cab stopped she had pulled open the street door.

"Oh, Mr. Winslow!" she cried; then her voice broke and her eyes ran over.

"I'm glad to see you looking so well, Mrs. Billing," he said cheerfully, and he hurried her into the house.

He almost cried himself when he got into the familiar room. Everything was just as he had left it. For a moment he wondered if he were quite right in his head. All that had happened since he went away seemed like a painful dream. Perhaps he had never been away at all.

Then Mrs. Billing's voice broke in upon him.

"I've never had the heart to alter nothin'," she said. "And I kept a-hopin' for a long time that you'd turn up again some time. And now, the Lord be praised, you have a-turned up. And here be all your letters, sir ; and there's a new suit of clothes upstairs, and your linen is all ready for puttin' on, and I expect you're terrible hungry."

"Possibly I shall be," he said, "by the time I have washed and got into some fresh clothes."

"You'll find 'em all ready, sir. And the vicar's been here three times, and he says as how he'll call again."

"He's well, I hope," Stephen said, as he made his way slowly upstairs; but Mrs. Billing's answer did not reach him. He closed his bed-room door quickly and bolted it.

"Now," he said to himself, "I must put off John Winter and put on Stephen Winslow."

It did not take him long to effect the change, and when at length he looked at his reflection in the mirror of his wardrobe, he smiled complacently. Like most other men, he was not without a touch of vanity, and he fancied that nothing became him so well as clerical attire.

Unlocking a large box, he packed away his tweed suit very carefully. He did not wish Mrs. Billing's inquisitive eyes to see it.

"I'll give it away at the first opportunity," he reflected; then he locked the box, and stood before the wardrobe mirror again.

A moment later the door-bell rang, followed by Mr. Mayne's cheery voice, saying:

"So he's arrived, has he? That's well. Run up and tell him I've come to fetch him home with me to dinner."

Stephen almost groaned. He had avoided

the vicarage from his first coming into the parish. Not that he disliked Mr. Mayne, for in truth he was very fond of him. But Mrs. Mayne oppressed him—and Grace? Well, Grace was like her mother, the vicar said, and that of itself was quite sufficient.

“I fear I shall have to go,” Stephen said to himself dolorously, “for I know what he is when his mind is made up. But he might have allowed me the first evening alone in peace.”

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRANGE AWAKENING.

THE vicar would listen to no excuse. "I can see you are tired," he said; "that's the reason I came. I've got a cab outside, and nothing shall worry you. So get on your overcoat and come along. You need feeding up a bit, and when summer comes you'll get the colour back into your cheeks. Bless my soul, it seems almost like a dream to see you here in the flesh. I'm sorry my wife is away——"

"Isn't Mrs. Mayne at home?" Stephen interrupted feebly.

"She isn't; but don't let that trouble you," the vicar replied briskly. "Grace can look after things almost as well as her mother."

Stephen sighed gently, and allowed the vicar to help him on with his overcoat. Mr. Mayne talked incessantly. "You would just mope," he went on, "if left here alone, and moping is bad for any man. Now, then,

we are ready, I think," and he went and opened the door himself.

"You are very kind," Stephen said feebly, and then the cab rattled away over the stones.

The vicar's drawing-room looked very warm and cosy. After the bare walls of the hospital, which he had looked at night and day for three months, it seemed a veritable nest of luxury. He dropped wearily into an easy chair by the fire and sighed.

Grace came in a few minutes later, looking quite sweet and demure. She expressed her pleasure at seeing him again, with a little touch of diffidence, and then retired to the farther side of the room. Mr. Mayne did nearly all the talking, and if Grace was appealed to her answer was given in as few words as possible.

Stephen looked across at her once or twice, and a questioning expression came into his eyes. He had scarcely seen her for a year. He took a dislike to Grace when he came into the parish because the vicar said she was like her mother, and since Marcella came upon the scene he had no eyes for anyone; but evidently Grace

Mayne would bear looking at a second time.

Three of the older children joined the others at dinner—two girls and a boy—and in a very few minutes the talk became general. The children were by no means shy, though Stephen had to admit to himself that they were exceedingly well-behaved.

He had been silent so long, and so long shut out from the sound of children's voices, that it was a real pleasure to listen to their laughter and their inconsequent chatter, and a relief now and then to put in a word or two of his own.

Indeed, before the dinner ended, he had got to be quite animated. He seemed to get also a fresh vision of the domestic side of life.

From the head of the table the vicar beamed on his offspring. It was evident that he was very proud of them, and that he entered with zest into nearly everything that interested them.

Grace was very quiet, but she looked exceedingly comely, and presided, Stephen thought, with exceptional tact and sweetness. He began to wonder why he had been

so prejudiced against her, why he had thought her plain, why he had called her a terror. Had time changed her, subdued her, added some fresh traits to her character? Or was the change in him?

After dinner Grace played and sang. She begged to be excused, but the vicar would not be denied. For half an hour she seemed to dream on the piano. Quaint, weird, tender things she played—fragments from Beethoven and Mendelssohn and Chopin and Grieg—that hushed all outward complaining, and stole like balm of healing into the heart.

Stephen closed his eyes and listened with rapt attention. There was something very beautiful in the home-life of the vicar, after all. He used to pity him, and wonder how he bore up under the burden of such a family. He was beginning to see that there was another side to the picture.

“Now sing to us, my dear,” the vicar said, when at length Grace lifted her fingers from the keyboard.

“Oh, father,” Grace answered deprecatingly; “Mr. Winslow will be quite tired out.”

“No, indeed; you are resting me wonder-



"QUAINT, WEIRD, TENDER THINGS SHE PLAYED."

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fully," Stephen protested. "It is a long time since I have enjoyed music so much."

Grace's voice was not of very great compass, but within its own limits it was very sweet and sympathetic. Perhaps she selected the songs that suited her mood. She was quietly happy, with an undertone of sadness that made itself felt now and then.

Stephen opened his eyes and looked at her while she sang, and he was bound to admit that on the whole she made a pleasant picture—not a picture that dazzled or bewildered—Grace was not handsome, but she was undeniably comely. Hers was a face that grew upon the beholder. No feature was perfect, save, perhaps, her eyes, which were large and deep and clear as a mountain tarn.

"Please sing us another song, Miss Mayne," Stephen found himself saying at length. He forgot what time it was, forgot even that he was tired. It was just delightful to sit in a large easy chair and listen to Grace while she sang; her voice was soft as a throstle's note, and soothing as a lullaby.

The announcement that his cab was at

the door broke like a discordant note on the quiet harmony of the evening.

"You have been good to me," he said impulsively to the vicar. "It's been like heaven."

"I'm glad you've enjoyed the evening," the vicar answered. "I've missed mother myself. I wish she'd been at home."

"Will she be away long?"

"Another week, I expect. But come again soon, Mr. Winslow."

"I will if I may," he answered, and he looked appealingly toward Grace.

"Yes, do," she said eagerly, while a warm blush mounted suddenly to her cheeks.

His own little room seemed bare and cheerless after the vicar's warm fireside. Mrs. Billing was waiting up for him, eager to show him any little attention.

"No, I shall not need anything more to-night," he said. "I've had a wonderfully pleasant evening," and he dropped with a little sigh into his chair, and stared abstractedly into the fire.

Two faces seemed to look at him from out the glowing grate: the one homely but pleasant, the other bewitchingly beautiful.

Why, he wondered, should Grace's face play hide-and-seek with that of Marcella? and why should his heart ache to-night for something that had never troubled him before? Was it the glimpse he got of the vicar's home-life that had awakened a dormant hunger in his soul? or did Grace's singing remind him of something long forgotten? He had scarcely given the domestic side of life a passing thought. The word "home" had had for him little or no significance. He had spent all his life among strangers, or in lodgings. A room to work in and another to sleep in were all that he required, and so long as they were comfortable and clean nothing else mattered.

But to-night a feeling of discontent began to flutter in his heart. He raised his eyes from the grate, and cast a swift glance round the book-lined walls. How often he had entered this dingy little room with a sigh of ineffable content! Now he was sighing for something different.

Then his eye rested on a heap of letters lying on his writing-table. He glanced at them one by one, without opening them, until he came to a letter in Marcella's hand-

writing. In a moment he tore it open, and read it with flushed cheeks and lips that trembled in spite of himself.

It was Marcella's acceptance of his offer of marriage, written on the very day she was taken ill, but posted several days later. He read it through several times, and then folded it very reverently, and replaced it in the envelope.

For a long time he looked into the fire again without moving. Was it Marcella's face he saw ?

" Ah, well," he sighed at length, " I shall hear from her to-morrow." And he turned out the lights and climbed slowly to his bedroom.

He had written to Marcella that very morning before he left the hospital. The letter did not reach her till the last post that evening. Hence it came about that, while Stephen was in the vicar's drawing-room, listening to Grace's singing, Marcella, with his letter open before her, was trying to sort out the emotions that fought for the mastery in her heart.

The revulsion of feeling was almost overwhelming, and for a moment or two she

wanted to shriek for very joy and gladness—she did laugh loud and long, for she was in the house alone—her brother and his wife having gone out for the evening. But, curiously enough, the reaction that followed was almost equally sudden and startling. There is all the difference in the world between worshipping a saint and loving a man. The ideal Stephen laid away in lavender, and contemplated in moments of spiritual exaltation, was not exactly the same as the real Stephen attired in broadcloth, and taken for better for worse as a husband.

She was not sure that she wanted a husband. In fact, she had an uncomfortable feeling that she would rather be without one. Stephen as a saint—canonised, etherealised, spiritualised, vapourised—was delightful. But Stephen as a husband, eating oysters and snoring in his easy chair after dinner, might be a very prosaic and commonplace acquisition.

An hour after the receipt of Stephen's letter she felt as though some kind of outrage had been committed. It was like taking down Nelson's effigy from the top of the monument and setting it astride one of the

lions. There was something absolutely incongruous in Stephen coming to life again ; it upset everything, blotted out all the sweetly pathetic pictures that her fancy had painted, turned all her pleasant day-dreams into commonplace realities, and vulgarised her ideal to such an extent that she did not recognise it.

She could not have been more shocked if she had seen a picture of the Apostles in trousers and top-hats. So completely had Stephen, to her fancy, passed out of the realm of the earthly into that of the heavenly, that to have him back again enshrined in common clay was like a false note in music—she resented the discord as she resented everything out of its proper place.

Had she, like Grace Mayne, cherished the hope all the time that he was still alive—had she let her imagination play round his home-coming—had she pictured a home, somewhere in which she would reign, his happy wife—her feelings would have been of an entirely different order. But she had taken it for granted that he was dead—had never doubted it for a moment—had never dreamed of his coming back ; hence the

idea of being his wife had taken no root in her nature. What love she had had lost its human quality. Her affection had become, without her knowing it, a passionless reverence for an etherealised ideal.

It was a strange and a painful awakening, and when she began to realise what had happened she could have whipped herself with scorpions. She felt as though she had been a hypocrite and a deceiver, and she did her best to get back into what she conceived to be a proper frame of mind.

She slept very little that night. It seemed to her as though the centre of gravity had been shifted, and that nothing was where it ought to be, or as it ought to be.

To add to her distress, the old doubts that haunted her during the first days of her illness came back again, and refused to be driven away. Was it simply her beauty that he cared for? Did he go away, in the first instance, because he believed her beauty was destroyed? And had he come back to her because he had learned in some way that she had come out of the furnace unscathed?

It seemed an unworthy kind of doubt to

cherish, but the trouble was there were so many things that lent colour to it. She could not help recalling that his very love-making had been more than anything else an expression of admiration. Nor could she forget that Dr. Priestley had based his action on the belief that Stephen loved her face and not her soul.

As the night wore away she got into deeper and more troubled waters. It seemed the very apotheosis of tragedy that the joyous laughter with which she greeted the knowledge of Stephen's return should in a few hours be turned into a moan of doubt and foreboding.

"I must get to the bottom of my doubts," she said tearfully. "I must find out where I stand and where he stands. To-morrow, when he comes, his love shall be put to the test. Better find out the truth now than later."

CHAPTER XVII.

FACE TO FACE.

STEPHEN reached the house of George Dacre at five o'clock in the afternoon, and was shown at once into the drawing-room. He had come in response to a telegram from Marcella, and he was on the dot of the time appointed. The day was already beginning to fade, and the large and richly-furnished room was in semi-darkness.

“Evidently people of wealth,” he reflected, as he ran his eye up and down the room; then he went and stood by the fireplace and leaned on his elbow on the mantelpiece. He felt too restless, too excited, to sit down. In a moment or two he would be face to face with Marcella. What would that mean? He had asked her to be his wife and she had consented, but much had happened since then. When he proposed to her she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. But what now? Should he

find her disfigured for life? He could no longer deny to himself that it was her beauty that had attracted him. If she had been plain he would not have looked at her a second time. Her charity, her good works, her devotion to the cause of the suffering, her noble courage, her self-denial, her patient endurance, these were not the things that attracted him; these were not the qualities that made him anxious to marry her. It was her face, and her face alone, that fascinated him.

“And if——”

He turned uneasily and looked out of the window. He had come prepared to abide by his offer. As an honourable man he could not go back upon his word. As a Christian minister he was doubly bound to pursue the straight course.

If it should turn out that his fears were unfounded, he would be a proud and happy man. Some of the old ecstasy would come back to him. The delight of the eye would atone for any sentimental feeling that might be absent; while companionship in sympathy and endeavour would round his life into completeness and harmony.

The door creaked at length, and then was pushed slowly open. There was a muffled footstep and the rustle of a dress. Then a lady, attired for the street, entered. A blue serge walking dress, jacket of the same material; a hat devoid of ornament, and a thick veil, which but dimly outlined her face.

Stephen looked at her without moving. Surely this plainly attired figure could not be Marcella?

She advanced rapidly and held out her hands to him.

“Are you Marcella?” he gasped.

“I am,” she answered. “Do you not recognise me?”

“Will you not remove your veil and let me look at you?” he questioned huskily.

“I would prefer not,” she answered slowly. “It is better you should not see my face—at least, not just yet.”

He groaned audibly, and leaned heavily on the mantelpiece.

“I—I—did not know it was so bad as that,” he gasped at length.

“Yet I am the same,” she said slowly and quietly.

“ Yes—yes ; your soul remains untouched. I shall try not to forget that. But——” Then he hesitated, and dropped his eyes to the floor.

“ You valued my good looks, Stephen ? ” she questioned naïvely.

“ Above everything,” he gasped. “ Marcella Dacre without her——” Then he hesitated again, and looked despairingly out of the window.

“ Why do you leave your sentences unfinished ? ” she questioned at length.

“ Because I can find no words that express exactly what I feel,” he said bluntly.

“ Let us sit down and talk the matter over quietly,” she said, after a moment of silence. “ So much has happened since we plighted our troth.”

He winced visibly, and dropped slowly into an easy chair.

“ The letter you wrote to me the day you were taken ill,” he said at length, “ was not posted until several days later. I read it for the first time last evening.”

It was her turn to start now. That one

little fact changed the whole complexion of things.

“Then you concluded that my silence meant a refusal?” she questioned.

“No, Marcella, I did not. Let me be quite frank and honest. You received my proposal in such a way that I felt quite confident what your final answer would be.”

“But since my answer was so long delayed, you did not feel bound to me in any way?”

He coloured slightly. She was reading his heart more accurately than he desired. Yet he was anxious to be quite honest and candid.

“I do not say the thought never crossed my mind,” he stammered, after a pause. “You see, I was in the toils of ecclesiastical superstition at the time. I was in doubt if a minister should marry at all. Moreover, I had received a shock which completely unnerved me.”

“You mean at the hospital?”

“Yes; it almost drove me mad. Then came the railway collision; after which I was haunted by a burning desire

to get away from everything, myself included."

"And you deliberately hid yourself?"

"Do not blame me for that beyond what I deserve. I was not quite myself."

"When you wanted to get away from everything, yourself included, you mean that you particularly wanted to get away from me?"

"You must not forget," he stammered, "that what I thought was you was not you at all."

"Yes, I understand. The revulsion of feeling would be complete."

"I fear I cannot explain myself more clearly," he said in low tones. "Put yourself in my place. Remember how your beauty thrilled every nerve and fibre of my being."

"Was there nothing else in me that touched your heart?" she questioned. "Was my soul so poor that my face eclipsed it?"

"It was your beauty that attracted me first, but I was getting to know you better every day. I want to be quite candid with you, Marcella. We are to live together, and

it is better that all misunderstandings should be cleared away at the outset."

"So even now you are willing to take me as I am?"

"Of course I am, or I should not be here."

"And have you come to this determination recently?"

"Ah, Marcella, while I lay ill many things became clear to me that were hidden before. I placed creed where I should have placed conduct, and observance eclipsed a larger duty."

"Then it is duty that impels you?"

"Why do you question me so closely, Marcella? Do you doubt my sincerity?"

"No, no; but we may be quite sincere when we are doing wrong. The Apostle Paul was sincere when he persecuted the Church."

"But I am not persecuting you, Marcella," he said, with a pathetic smile. "I would guard you and screen you, and make your life as happy as possible."

"But do you love me, Stephen?"

He started, and coloured to the roots of his hair.

"Marcella," he said in a tone of reproach, "would I have asked you to marry me four months ago if I did not love you?"

"I am not speaking of four months ago," she said quietly. "Think of all that has happened since, and then look me in the eyes and tell me that you love me."

"I can barely see your eyes," he said with a smile.

She turned her head suddenly with an impatient movement. "We must understand each other fully, Stephen," she said, making a great effort to control her voice. "So much is at stake that we are bound to be honest with each other."

"But we need not probe old wounds that will heal if let alone."

"How do we know that they will heal if let alone? Some wounds grow worse and worse, and demand the surgeon's knife if any cure is to be effected."

"Then let me know candidly what it is that is troubling you?"

"I put a question to you just now which you evaded. Let me put the same question in another way. If you had

not proposed to me four months ago, would you, in view of all that has happened, do so to-day ? ”

“ Those hypothetical questions are never easy to answer,” he said evasively. “ It is much like asking a man what he would do if he were another man.”

“ I do not think so,” she said. “ You are not some other man, and I am not some other woman.”

“ But you have changed, Marcella.”

“ Is the face everything, Stephen ? ”

“ No—no. And yet, if the beautiful setting is marred or destroyed, you cannot help grieving, though you value the jewel still.”

For several moments there was silence ; then Marcella said, quietly : “ Have you my letter still ? ”

“ I have it in my pocket,” he replied.

“ Will you give it me ? ” she questioned.

“ Have you forgotten its contents ? ”

“ Not altogether,” and she rose and took the letter from his hand.

Slowly she read it through while her face flushed red behind the veil. Then, quick as thought, she tore it into fragments, and threw the pieces into the fire.

"Marcella!" he cried out in consternation.

"Now we start afresh," she said quietly. "You are no longer bound to me, nor I to you. You admired me once for my good looks, but you never loved me."

"You speak harshly, Marcella."

"I speak the truth, nevertheless, and you do not attempt to contradict what I say."

"I admit that your beauty was to me beyond all price."

"Then, on your own confession, you no longer value me."

"You have other qualities that I admire immensely."

"But admiration is not love. It is well that you were disillusioned before you and I committed an irreparable mistake."

"Why should it be a mistake? All material beauty is transient. Time lays its blighting hand on all."

"Stephen Winslow, you should not deal in sophisms. I admire your courage in being ready to stand by a bad bargain. It was very magnanimous on your part, but none the less foolish on that account. Let us



“‘YOU ARE NO LONGER BOUND TO ME NOR I TO YOU.’”

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say good-bye and part as friends. Let us forget, if we can, that we ever met."

"Do you mean it, Marcella?"

"How can I mean aught else?" she said proudly. "I have some self-respect left—some regard for my own happiness and yours."

He stood before her for a moment with bowed head. He had no reply to make. She had read his very soul.

"You will go away with a sense of relief?" she questioned at length.

"Yes—and no," he answered slowly. "If you were beautiful as when first I knew you nothing should drive me from you."

For a moment she hesitated. She was strongly tempted to fling her hat and veil aside.

"But since I am as I am?" she questioned.

"It is best we should go our separate ways," he said frankly.

"Some day you may learn to value a woman not for her good looks, but for the qualities of her heart and soul. Your experience should make you wise."

"Yours has made you good," he said

impulsively. "You are a nobler woman than when first I knew you."

"This is no time for compliments," she said proudly. "Good-bye."

He took her extended hand and held it for a moment; then turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FIRST COUSINS.

STEPHEN walked away from George Dacre's house with bent head and slow and hesitating steps. He felt that on the whole he had not come well out of the interview. He had made a pretence of being perfectly frank and honest and straightforward ; but habits slowly acquired are hard to break. The ecclesiastical atmosphere and temper are not favourable to outspokenness. Like most men who give to the Church what is due to Christianity, he had become a casuist without knowing it. The turn of mind which, for want of a better name, is termed Jesuitical, is in most instances a growth, often slow and unsuspected. Ethical niceties too often disappear in the dim light of ecclesiasticism. Evil may be an instrument of good. A lie may serve the ends of truth : the means are justified by the end. Push forward the ecclesiastical ark by honest and truthful

methods if you can, but in any case push it forward.

Stephen had been growing in this direction for years. And it was not until he lay sick and at the point of death that a clearer and stronger light burst in upon his soul. But even yet, habits too frequently proved stronger than purpose. To search for an excuse when desire led in a certain direction had become almost an instinct. The ingenuousness of the child is rarely found in the priest.

"I fenced, as usual," he said to himself, as he walked away into the crowded thoroughfare. "And she read me like a book. I wonder what she thinks of me now?"

In some respects he was inclined to congratulate himself that he had got out of a very difficult corner, especially as he believed his worst fears were more than realised, and the beauty he had worshipped had perished for ever. But his feeling of relief was more than counterbalanced by a keen sense of humiliation. To stand well in the estimation of our friends is one of the primal instincts of human nature; it was a matter on which Stephen was keenly sensitive.

“No,” he kept repeating to himself, as he plunged into the thronging tide of life that surged up and down Oxford Street, “I have not come well out of it. She would have respected me more if I had told her candidly all the truth. She will think the Jesuitical taint has got into my blood. I wonder if it has?”

He climbed on to an omnibus at length. He would have been wiser had he got inside, for the wind was bitingly cold, but the force of habit was upon him, and his thoughts were in another place.

“She is a very noble woman,” he reflected, as the keen wind whistled past his ears. “And she has the candour of those who have not learned the tricks of the casuist. I wonder if she is a Quaker, or a Dissenter of some kind? I fear in her heart she will despise me. I really must get the taint out of my blood. What is ceremonial worth if honesty is absent?”

He got off at Oxford Circus. He was feeling cold and hungry, and walked briskly down Regent Street. There were several restaurants near, at any one of which he could get a good dinner.

“She might have asked me to have a cup of tea,” he reflected. “She did not even tell me that I looked weak and ill. She spoke of parting as friends, but I fear she will never want to see me again. It must be a great blow to her.”

He sought a corner at the far end of the room, under the gallery and out of sight of the band. He liked to hear the music, but the sight of the performers irritated him. The big room was full of people. Many of the ladies and gentlemen were in evening dress. There was a low buzz of conversation, with a ripple of laughter here and there. A grateful sense of warmth and luxury pervaded the place. The tables were nicely decorated with flowers. All this he took in at a glance. Then he picked up the menu card and looked at it without seeing it.

His thoughts were still back in George Dacre’s drawing-room.

“It’s just as well she destroyed that letter,” he said to himself. “She no longer believes what she wrote then. I was to her a kind of mediæval saint and hero rolled into one. She must blush now when she thinks of it. Alas! I fear I aped the priest and

missed the man ; for the future, God helping me, I will try to be a man first. How the very atmosphere of ecclesiasticism enervates and saps ! ”

He helped himself to a sardine and some cucumber salad, with scarcely a thought of what he was doing. Overhead the band was playing a dreamy waltz, which the diners encored when it was done. At his right some people left their table, their places being instantly taken by others. In front a gentleman was drinking Turkish coffee, the perfume of which reached his nostrils, with an agreeable sense of something long forgotten. Yet he was only sub-conscious of all this. He could not drag away his thoughts from Marcella and their recent interview.

“ If her beauty had remained,” his thoughts ran on, “ I am sure in time I should have loved her for herself alone. And she would have made me a better man. I like her brave Puritan spirit. That is a heritage the Dissenters may well be proud of. Better honesty in homespun than——

“ Hello ! How like that man is to my cousin Sam ! But of course he would not

dine here unless he got somebody to treat him."

"Thick soup or clear, sir?" said the waiter at his side.

"Thick, please," and he strained his eyes toward the door, but the man who was so much like his cousin Sam had disappeared. Could he have got a nearer view he would have discovered that it was his cousin.

Sam, having got the Jew's cheque the previous day, was now bent on enjoying himself. "The best dinners, the best wines, the best cigars," he said to himself. Those three things comprehended Sam's idea of enjoyment.

He had been in a fever of anxiety lest Stephen should turn up alive until what Mr. Jacobs called "the price of the reversion" was safe in his pocket; then all his fears vanished, and he vowed it would be a most delightful joke if Stephen or his ghost should revisit his former haunts.

Having got the cheque, his first business was to turn it into banknotes. These he placed in a belt which he wore round his waist.

“Now,” he said to himself, “I’m safe, whatever happens. Banks may go to smash and cheques may be dishonoured, but Bank of England notes will be accepted as legal tender anywhere.”

It was with the one idea of enjoyment that Sam strolled into one of the best of the West-end restaurants for his evening meal. He had often looked with longing eyes at its richly decorated vestibule, its coloured marbles, its elaborate electroliers, its tessellated floor. But he had never ventured inside. The waiter would expect a tip equal to what he could afford to spend on a dinner. Such abodes of luxury were not for such as he.

Now, however, that his ample waist was surrounded with banknotes, he could afford to play the gentleman, and he lost no time in calling for the wine list. The bottle, however, was left unfinished, and the waiter did not even get his tip, so eager was Sam to get out of the place.

It was all through a lady who sat at an adjoining table moving her chair. He looked up as she did so, and in a moment Stephen’s face came into a direct line with his own.

“Great Scott!” he exclaimed under his breath, and he dropped his knife and fork in a moment. Then he moved his own chair so that a lady’s hat might block the line of vision.

By lowering his head, however, he could still see Stephen’s face, and every now and then he looked with eager, anxious eyes.

At first he was inclined to think that it was another case of “double,” but he was very quickly convinced on the point. There were certain little peculiarities that belonged so exclusively to his cousin that he was quite sure no other man could have caught the trick of them, and Nature never repeated herself in every detail.

He tried his best to go on with his dinner. He would have to pay for it, and it was a part of his creed to get his money’s worth, but for some reason his appetite failed him completely. The sight of Stephen produced a curious sense of oppression. He was conscious of a painful choking in the throat. The room became insufferably close and hot, and the band sounded feebly and far away.

Gulping down half a glass of wine he staggered to his feet and made hurriedly for



"‘GREAT SCOTT!’ HE EXCLAIMED UNDER HIS BREATH."

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the door. He was delayed for some time over his bill, but ultimately he got into the open air, and was able to open his lungs to the keen east wind that was whistling shrilly up the street.

"Well, this is about the nearest squeak any man ever had," he said to himself as he strolled across Piccadilly Circus. "I wonder if it is in the papers? Old Jacobs will murder me when he gets to know. Great Scott! Another day's delay, and I should have been done for," and he felt at the belt underneath his waistcoat.

"*Echo!* Last edition!" called a boy almost under his nose.

"Here, lad," and he gave the boy a penny, and rushed away to the nearest lamp. He scanned the first page eagerly, and the second, but there was no allusion to the return of Stephen. The third page was looked through with equal care, and the fourth, then he crumpled up the paper and threw it away.

"It'll be in to-morrow, very likely," he said to himself. "I wonder what I had better do?"

For an hour he walked the streets; then

he returned to his lodgings and let himself in with a latch-key. Why he should feel so nervous and upset—why such a guilty feeling should haunt him, he could not understand.

He had told himself that it would be a great joke if Stephen should turn up after he had got the money. That it would serve old Jacobs right. That it would be a case of the biter being bitten; that it would mean the dealing out of poetic justice to one of the worst rascals in London.

Yet for some reason he was unable to gloat over the transaction as he had hoped to do. It was in vain he argued that it was a fair and square deal, that old Jacobs knew the risk and took it with his eyes open. It was in vain he pleaded that old Jacobs would have had no qualms of conscience if it had so happened that Stephen was really dead, and the time came for the estate to be administered. Then why should he worry?

“It is all because of the stupid way in which I was brought up,” he said to himself irritably. “It is curious how those early superstitions stick. I thought I had got rid of every remnant of a conscience years ago.

And here I am, fighting the battle over again, as though I belonged to a Y.M.C.A.”

Despite his qualms of conscience, however, Sam had no intention of giving up the money. He felt meaner than he had ever felt in his life before. He knew that the honourable and manly thing would be to go back to the old Jew and tell him that his cousin had turned up on the very day the money was paid, and before any of it was spent, and that therefore as a man of honour he could not keep it.

But Sam had let honour slip many years before, though conscience still lived, in spite of all his efforts to kill it.

“My old father would say that such money would carry a curse with it,” he said to himself. “But I’ll risk the curse. Yes, I’ll risk the curse. I’m not going to be such a fool as to give it up when I’ve been to so much trouble to get it. But I’ll get out of the Jew’s way, or he’ll murder me.” And with this reflection he put out the lights and went to bed.

CHAPTER XIX.

JEW AND GENTILE.

DURING the night, while he lay tossing on his bed unable to sleep, Sam made up his mind to put the sea between him and Mr. Jacobs, and to do it at the earliest possible opportunity. On the face of it there seemed no particular reason why he should do this. His transaction with the Jew had been perfectly square and above-board, and he had every reason to congratulate himself that for once the money-lender had over-reached himself. It was what he hoped he would do. To dish the Jew and make him suffer as he had made other people suffer had been one of his ambitions.

Yet for some reason, now that he had got his desire, he was unhappy. Some dormant faculty in him had been suddenly stirred into life. A long forgotten code of honour clamoured for recognition. Con-

science, like a sleeping dog, had been aroused, and would not lie still again.

It was vexing that Stephen had turned up alive just when he had got the money and had spent none of it. If he had waited only a few weeks it would not have seemed so bad. The strictly moral and honourable thing, no doubt, would be to take the money back and tell the Jew that the supposed dead had come to life again.

"I'll feel easier when I'm out of the country," Sam said to himself almost angrily. "Why should I worry myself about a dirty Jew who has been cheating people all his life? If he had won in this game of chance would he have considered me? Then why should I consider him? All the same, Stephen might have kept out of sight a few days longer."

Long before daybreak Sam was at work packing his bags. "I'll be off before the Jew is awake," he said to himself. "He'll be round here directly he knows, and I don't want to see him, and, what is more, I must not let him know where to find me. He'd murder me to get the money back again."

Sam told his landlady that he would be

away a month, and she heard him give orders to the cabman to drive him to Euston. He had not gone far, however, before he leaned out of the window and told cabby to drive him to Charing Cross.

He felt like a thief escaping from justice ; and his great concern was to destroy the trail. So far, his good fortune had brought him far more pain than pleasure. How keen he had been to finger the money ! How miserable he had been nearly ever since ! He had got even with the Jew, but for some reason or other no real satisfaction had grown out of the transaction. Was it always so, he wondered ? Did the reality never come up to the anticipation ?

By the time he had crossed the Channel he felt in better spirits. " I'm a fool to worry," he said to himself. " Why should I ? I intend to have a good time, first in Paris, and then at Monte Carlo. Perhaps my luck will follow me there," and he rubbed his hands together and smiled grimly.

Meanwhile, Mr. Isaac Jacobs was suffering such tortures as he had never known in his life before. His morning paper had been brought to him while at breakfast. His



"LONG BEFORE DAYBREAK SAM WAS AT WORK PACKING
HIS BAGS."

first impulse was to let it remain unopened until he had finished his meal. But curiosity and cupidity proved too strong for him. He had so many investments, was interested in so many ventures, was so closely related to the financial gang in England and on the Continent, that few things of importance happened either in the commercial or political world that did not affect him to a greater or lesser degree. His transaction with Sam Winslow had for the moment passed out of his mind. He would gloat over that later on when he fingered the Rev. Stephen's fortune. Meanwhile, he had one or two other matters on hand which he was anxious to pull off.

He opened the paper mechanically at the commercial page and began to fold it, so that he might place it in front of him while he ate. Suddenly, however, his hands and arms stiffened, as if seized by cramp; his eyes opened to twice their normal size; his lower jaw fell, his lips became livid. Then, with a groan, he lay back in his chair and gasped.

Mr. Jacobs made no attempt to finish his meal. Instead, he writhed in his chair

like one in great physical pain. Big beads of perspiration came out on his yellow brow and rolled down his face, his eyes wandered round the room as if in a mute appeal for help ; his bony fingers clutched convulsively the arms of his chair.

Speech for the time being was impossible. There are some emotions too deep for words—feelings that no language can portray. Mr. Jacobs's face became positively ghastly in its pallor a little later on. The blow was simply overwhelming.

It was the first time in thirty years that he had over-reached himself ; the first time in any monetary transaction that he had been outwitted ; the first time he had suffered any serious loss. He saw no clients that day ; would not even see his friends. He was too angered, too humiliated, too chagrined.

What years of labour and intrigue that loss represented ! And the terrible thing was that a loss was a loss for ever. He might win an equal amount to-morrow, but he would still be the poorer by the amount that Sam Winslow had carried away with him. While almost equally galling was

the fact that Sam had been too cute for him.

It was nearly lunch time when Mr. Jacobs found his speech, and then he used language that no compositor would set up. To be outwitted by a gentile! To allow a simple-minded, blundering idiot like Sam Winslow to get the better of him, nearly drove him frantic. He, Isaac Jacobs, the money-lender who was regarded by the fraternity as the most successful of them all, to allow himself to be swindled with eyes open, was a humiliation too terrible to be borne!

He found his way to Sam Winslow's lodgings early in the afternoon. There was very little satisfaction in cursing the gentile race to stone walls, but there might be some satisfaction in telling Sam what he thought of him. Possibly, also, by threatening impossible legal pains and penalties he might get him to disgorge some of the money he had got through false pretences. At any rate, the game was worth playing.

Sam's landlady opened the door, and explained the situation.

"Gone away for a month!" Mr. Jacobs gasped, stroking his tangled beard.

"He said he'd be away a month, and he's taken all his clothes with him."

"Where's he gone to?"

"Haven't the remotest idea. I heard him tell the cabby to drive him to Euston."

"To Euston, eh? Let me think," and Mr. Jacobs walked away in a brown study.

"I have it," Mr. Jacobs said to himself at length, stopping suddenly short. "He's frightened. He thinks I can put the law into operation, and so has run away. I must find him. I must work upon his fears. I must threaten or—— Ah!"

And he walked on again with quickened step. When he got to his own room he locked the door so that he should not be disturbed. A new idea had crossed his mind. A desperate as well as a dangerous enterprise loomed on the horizon.

"To Euston means to Charing Cross or London Bridge," he muttered to himself. "A frightened man will try to hide the scent. He's gone abroad. To Paris, perhaps; or, more likely, to Monte Carlo. He'll try his luck. The passion of gold will be

upon him. He'll try to add to what he's got. With caution it may be all got back again." And he chuckled.

Then his oily face looked grave, and he knitted his brows.

"The parson is more difficult," he went on. "But he may die young. Why not? There's an overwhelming presumption that he's made no will yet—is not likely to unless he gets married. If he dies before he makes a will—ah! Who knows? My good luck may stand by me still."

On the following day Mr. Jacobs took down his shutters again. His calamity looked less hopeless, less overwhelming, than on the previous day. There were still possibilities in the case that had not occurred to him at first. The chances of life could be manipulated now and then. Undesirable people sometimes died very conveniently. From his point of view there was no particular reason why the Rev. Stephen Winslow should be blessed with long life. If it could be arranged that he should die a natural death, at an early date, it would simplify matters a good deal.

But a natural death was not easy to

arrange. He might catch some malignant disease ; might possibly be inoculated with the virus of some fatal complaint ; might step down some unexpected trap door ; might—— Well, there were a hundred ways out of life, and no man had yet set limits to human ingenuity.

A few weeks later Mrs. Billing received a visit from a small man with a hooked nose and a hump on his shoulders. He came to make inquiries respecting a Chancery suit in which a certain family of the name of Billing was interested.

Mrs. Billing was alert and communicative at once, and after narrating her family history she was led on to talk about her lodger—his habits, his methods of work, his modes of recreation, his hours of rest. Certain evenings he set apart for study ; other evenings he met inquirers in the vestry of the church ; other evenings he visited working men after their return from work or from the public-house.

It did not occur to Mrs. Billing that her visitor appeared to be far more interested in the doings of her lodger than in the fortunes of the Billings. Mrs. Billing being unsus-

pecting, answered without hesitation all the questions that were asked. She spoke of Stephen's devotion to his work, of his generosity to the poor, of his readiness to sacrifice himself for the good of others, of his growing attachment to the vicar and his family.

What appeared, however, to interest the stranger most in Stephen's work was his meeting with inquirers in the vestry of his church. There were possibilities in it beyond anything Stephen saw or even imagined.

The stranger shook hands very effusively with Mrs. Billing when he left, and assured her that if, in the Chancery case, anything appeared to her advantage he would communicate with her at once.

"A very civil spoken little man," was Mrs. Billing's comment when she bowed him into the street. "I wonder if any luck will ever come to me."

A few weeks later Stephen found himself in his vestry one evening with only one inquirer, and he a Jew—a small, meek, and greatly distressed individual, who was anxious to know all the truth about Christianity, that he might embrace it.

“Judaism,” he told Stephen, “no longer satisfied his intellect, or brought peace to his troubled heart. Christianity seemed to him the very thing to which the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures pointed—the thing that could round off and complete the glowing visions of Isaiah.”

Stephen was greatly impressed with the little man’s evident sincerity, with his knowledge of the Scriptures, and with his pitiful appeal for more light. To win a man from the Hebrew faith to the Christian fold would be an achievement indeed!

Stephen exercised all his argumentative and dialectical skill. The little Jew raised objections, and Stephen met them. The evening wore away rapidly. Question followed answer, and answer followed question, in quick and eager succession. The little Jew’s doubts were being removed one by one. Light was gradually breaking in upon his mind.

Stephen sat in his chair with a large Bible open in front of him on the table. The Jew leaned over him that he might read more clearly the printed page.

It was getting late when the Jew left.

He stole quickly into the open air, and closed the door softly behind him.

Stephen still sat in his easy chair, with his forehead resting on the open book. The lights were out, though the gas was turned on.

In Gunter Street, Mrs. Billing was wondering what had become of her lodger.

CHAPTER XX.

SELF-REVELATION.

AFTER her interview with Stephen, Marcella passed through several days of painful depression. The hardest thing in life is to see our ideals slowly dissolving before our eyes. And this was Marcella's first experience of that process of disillusionment which appears to be a necessary condition of our earthly existence.

She had been indignant with Frank Priestley for suggesting that Stephen cared only for her good looks. It had seemed to her almost treason. He was so far removed from everything that was of the earth earthly, that only love in its highest and most spiritual form could possess him. And now to discover that Frank Priestley had been right all along—that the man she had idealised had loved her only for her pretty face—that the moment he discovered her good looks had departed, or were even in peril, the fire

of his passion had died down into ashes—was a humiliation almost too grievous to be borne.

For a day or two her heart was in revolt against all men. They were all alike : they cared for nothing in a woman but a pretty face. Her real self—the qualities of her soul—they did not recognise. She might be the noblest woman that ever breathed—the wisest, the most constant ; but that mattered nothing if her face were plain, or her skin freckled.

But, so long as she had a pretty face and could be treated as a pretty toy, it did not matter if she had not two ideas in her empty little head ; men would go on worshipping all the same, and profess eternal devotion.

It seemed to her humiliating and contemptible. She would never believe in a man again, whatever he might profess. If Stephen Winslow was so earthly minded, what of the rank and file ? Men were mere animals, and unworthy of that divine affection which women gave in such lavish measure.

Within a week, however, Marcella had

grown out of that mood into one which was much more reasonable. The hard facts of the world confronted her at every step. In the main, women were not beautiful. Not one woman in twenty had a lovely face. Some of the married and most-loved women she knew were unmistakably plain ; while a good many society beauties remained unwed, and apparently unloved. How, then, fared her argument ? It was clear her hasty generalisation broke down before the hard logic of facts.

Men admired a pretty face, no doubt. All men did. It was an instinct to admire pretty things. But admiration was not love. To say that a man fell in love with a beautiful face could never be strictly true. Love is something more, something greater, something holier. Beauty may awaken a passionate desire for possession, but mere beauty can never satisfy the affections or appease the deep hunger of the soul. A blind man might love a woman he had never seen.

What was love ? That question set Marcella thinking along another line. It was clear that Stephen Winslow had never loved

her in any true sense. But what of herself ? Had she ever loved him ? It was easy to cast stones at another ; easy to blame all mankind because one man had mistaken a passing fancy for a divine passion. But was she less blameworthy herself ?

Slowly it dawned upon her that she had loved Stephen no more than he had loved her. With him, what he supposed was love was mere beauty worship ; with her it was hero worship. She had been reverencing an ideal, not loving a man. She had placed him on a pedestal and adored him as a saint. She placed a halo round his head, and never realised or tried to realise that at best he was only a man, and only an ordinary man at that.

The process of disillusionment is always painful, and Marcella fought her way through many tearful days and nights, but she came at length to firmer, if less romantic ground. It was better disillusionment should come now than later. To be disillusioned before marriage is painful enough ; but to be disillusioned after is tragic.

In those dark and bitter days Marcella found her chief consolation in her work. In

ministering to the griefs of others she forgot her own. Moreover, her own troubles and disappointments seemed trivial in comparison with the awful tragedies she came into contact with from day to day.

Also, she was young, and possessed of all the buoyancy and hopefulness that are inseparable from youth. She could not hug a disappointment for ever, however hard she tried. The vein of cynicism that revealed itself for awhile gradually tapered out until there was nothing of it left. The brief romance and tragedy of her life were becoming but a speck on the horizon, and then her thoughts took a fresh turn once more.

It was a brief announcement in one of the papers that Dr. Frank Priestley had made a most valuable medical discovery that set her thinking. The sight of his name in print sent a curious thrill to her heart, and awoke a hundred memories that had slumbered for months.

"I am glad he is winning fame," she said to herself, and then she threw aside the paper and determined to think no more about it. But memory is as perverse as a

woman. The more you try to forget, the more you fail. If let alone, memory will slink back like a dog to its kennel and fall asleep ; but attempt coercion, and it will bark and snap, and awake a hundred other memories that are asleep in their dens.

In the days that followed, other announcements appeared in the Press respecting Frank Priestley's great discovery, and in certain circles his name was constantly on people's lips. Unconsciously, Marcella found herself searching the papers for his name. And once, when she came across a short paragraph of adverse criticism, her face flamed in a moment with indignation. Then she grew pale, and tried to be angry with herself for taking any interest in the matter at all.

As the days passed away two things occasioned her considerable surprise and not a little concern. The first was that Stephen Winslow should pass so rapidly and so easily out of her life. The second was that Frank Priestley should more and more dominate her thoughts. What a curious irony of fate it was ! The man she had idealised, and worshipped, and promised to marry, had

become in a few weeks scarcely a memory ; while the man she had scorned, and told to his face that she hoped she would never see him again, was coming more and more into her heart and life.

Fate is very merciless at times. It seemed to Marcella that she might be allowed to go her way in peace. She had ceased to blame Frank Priestley for the part he had played—she no longer cherished toward him a single angry feeling. On the contrary, she was willing to concede that he had been very loyal and even disinterested ; indeed, there were moments when in her heart she pleaded for his forgiveness. Why, then, could not the past be wiped out and forgotten ?

She tried her best to wipe it out ; but the more diligently she used the sponge the more vivid the picture grew. She found herself recalling Frank's most trivial words, and even the tones of his voice.

He had hoped to win her, so he told her ; and she knew he was too good a man to be guilty of an untruth. The memory of his words shook her heart even now as a forest

is shaken by a storm. She recalled his patient care during her illness, his unsleeping solicitude. The sight of her during that awful time might have filled him with loathing—as the sight of another had filled the heart of Stephen ; but his love was more than a passion for a pretty face : it was built on a firmer foundation.

Ah, well ; strong as the foundation was, she had shattered it with a single blow.

“ Men will forgive much where women are concerned,” she said to herself ; “ but they will not forgive scorn and insult.”

But Marcella did not know even yet how far she had travelled away from Stephen in the direction of Frank Priestley. That was revealed to her one morning in an unexpected way.

She had retired to breakfast to her own room, taking a couple of newspapers with her—newspapers that represented different shades of political opinion. She opened the *Daily News* first, and instantly her eye was arrested by a bold headline : “ Minister Asphyxiated.” A moment later she gave a little gasp, for the name Stephen Winslow

stood out in the paragraph as though printed in blacker ink.

The announcement was very brief, and simply stated that the previous evening the Rev. Stephen Winslow, curate of St. Timothy's in the East, was found in the church vestry seated in a chair, with his forehead resting on an open Bible, as if asleep. It was discovered, however, that the gas was turned full on, and that the unfortunate gentleman was asphyxiated. Efforts to restore respiration had failed.

Marcella read the paragraph two or three times over, and then laid down the paper with a sigh.

"Poor Stephen!" she said, and she looked out of the window with a far-away expression in her eyes. What tribute under the circumstances might be considered appropriate she did not know. The one fact that stood out with absolute clearness was, she was not greatly distressed. Stephen, after all, was only a stranger to her. She had seen him only once since the day he proposed to her, and then only to say good-bye. He had passed out of her life more completely than she knew.

She was shocked, very naturally, painfully so. It was a tragic end, following close upon a painful struggle. But she could not grieve. There were worse tragedies than sudden death, and such a tragedy she could not help feeling she had escaped. She sighed again as she withdrew her eyes from the window; then picked up the paper and began to read again.

A moment or two later the paper dropped from her fingers, and she sat staring at the wall opposite as though her eyes would leap out of her head. All the blood left her face, her lips became livid, her breath came and went in painful gasps. For several moments she sat staring and gasping; then with a little cry, she buried her face in the end of the couch and burst into a passion of tears.

She understood now where her heart lay. The news that Stephen Winslow was dead left her comparatively unmoved; but the announcement that Dr. Frank Priestley, in the interests of medical science, had performed a daring and dangerous experiment with, it was feared, fatal results to himself, wrung her heart with a passion of grief such as she had never known before.

Almost before she knew she found herself on her knees praying, with streaming eyes, that Frank Priestley's life might be spared. It seemed to her that there was nothing else on earth that mattered—nothing else of any account. Governments might rise or fall; ministers fill up their little days; commerce prosper or decay; art and science flourish or stagnate—nothing mattered. The one life that was of more value than all other lives put together was in jeopardy. If Frank Priestley died, all the sunshine of the world would go out in darkness.

She no longer tried to argue—no longer fenced the question. For days past she had been trying to throw dust into her own eyes; had been unwilling to come to close quarters with her own heart.

Now the last refuge had been suddenly and ruthlessly stripped away. She stood defenceless before herself.

“ Oh, let him live ! Let him live ! ” was the burden of her prayer. It was nothing to her now that she had raised an impassable barrier between them. Nothing that she had steeled her heart against him, and played



"‘LET HIM LIVE!’ WAS THE BURDEN OF HER PRAYER."

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hypocrite to her own soul. Nothing that he might never speak to her again, though they met a hundred times. It was enough that he was her world ! In one blinding, bewildering flash, the whole unsparing truth had been revealed. The smouldering spark had burst suddenly into an all-devouring flame. The news that he was dying showed her that without him she had no wish to live.

It was a bewildering revelation. In all those months of silence her heart had been unconsciously turning to him. No word had passed between them ; no glance of his eye had quickened the throb of her heart. No tone of his voice had set her soul to music ; and yet, without knowing it, she had been yielding to him the priceless treasure of her love.

The old question remained unanswered still. She could not define what love was, but when it spoke she recognised its voice. When it stood before her she knew its form.

Whence it came she knew not ; but she knew it had come to stay. She no longer wondered that she parted from Stephen Winslow without a pang, that the news of

his death even wrung no sob from her heart. It was Frank Priestley who had won her heart. And yet he would never know. If he lived she could not tell him, and he would never ask her again. With her own hand she had struck the draught of happiness from her lips, not knowing what she did.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SHADOW OF THE CLOUD.

It was Grace Mayne who discovered Stephen. She had gone out to visit a bedridden parishioner of her father's, and make her comfortable for the night, and had to pass the church on the way.

She noticed in going a light in the vestry, and wondered whether Stephen was counselling inquirers, or whether he was meditating alone.

"How devoted he is!" she said to herself with a smile, and hurried on her way. No thought of her own devotion crossed her mind for a moment.

She was longer with Mrs. Tarbutt than usual, and when she passed the church again it was growing late. The vestry was in darkness, as she expected it would be, and the footpath that led past the vestry door was deserted.

She sometimes met Stephen and exchanged

a friendly greeting, for since his long illness he had been much less reserved. Indeed, Stephen seemed to her a different man in many ways. He was less of an ecclesiastic, less given to the adoration of symbols, less troubled about ordinances and vestments, less dogmatic in the defence of creeds, less concerned about mere churchism. There was also a breadth and charity in his preaching that she had never noticed in the old days—a sweet reasonableness that was wonderfully winning and inspiring. The mediæval mysticism in which he once delighted gave place to a practical demonstration of the fruits of Christianity. The ecclesiastic seemed gradually to evaporate, and the man came more and more into view.

This was a great comfort and satisfaction to Grace, though she had never talked about it. She disliked effeminacy in religion as in everything else, and had a very genuine horror of the growth of priestism. She was Protestant to her finger-tips, and every movement that tended towards Rome she regarded with alarm.

She had her fears respecting Stephen at one time, but they were all gone now ; the

whole tone and character of his life and preaching were of a robuster and more vigorous type. Even his conversation seemed more sincere, more simple, more direct.

All this, however, without her knowing it, had drawn her heart more and more towards him. These accidental meetings, their moments of hurried conversation, their occasional talks over the tea-table at the vicarage, all contributed to the same end.

She did not expect to meet him, for she had remained so long with Mrs. Tarbutt ; but he was in her thoughts as she walked slowly past the church. One step beyond the vestry door she paused suddenly, and turned quickly round.

"What a strong smell of gas!" she said to herself. "I wonder where it comes from."

She moved nearer the vestry door, and then bent her head towards the keyhole.

"Why, there's an escape in the church," she said to herself excitedly. "This must be seen to at once."

Her first impulse was to rush off to the house of the sexton, two or three streets away. The next moment she seized the iron

ring on the door, gave it a twist, and discovered that the door was unfastened.

Without thinking of consequences, she pushed it open and entered ; the next moment she was back in the open air, coughing and gasping. Yet in that moment she had seen, by the dim light coming through the vestry window, the figure of Stephen in his chair, with his head resting on the table.

As soon as she had recovered her breath she cried out, " Help ! help ! help ! " Then, shutting her teeth tightly, and trying not to breathe, she rushed back into the vestry and seized the chair in which Stephen sat, and began to drag it toward the door.

What happened after that was never quite clear to her. She felt a choking sensation in her throat ; there was a confused sound of voices in her ears. Strong hands caught her as she was falling, and dragged her somewhere. When she came to herself again she was sitting on the cold floor with her head resting against a stone wall, and a yard away a crowd of people, including two policemen and a reporter, gathered round a prone and unconscious figure.

She struggled to her feet after a few



"WITHOUT THINKING OF CONSEQUENCES, SHE PUSHED IT
OPEN AND ENTERED."

moments, and elbowed her way to Stephen's side.

"Is he alive?" she asked, with a painful gasp.

"I fear not, miss," was the answer. "We've been trying to restore him, but it seems of no use."

The reporter closed his notebook, and hurried away toward the City. The policemen consulted together for a few moments, and then one of them walked away for a stretcher. A doctor's carriage pulled up outside the low boundary wall, and a moment or two later the doctor was bending over the unconscious figure.

The crowd stood back to give more air space. The doctor made his examination with great deliberation. Grace held her breath, and watched him with dilating eyes. The doctor called to the policeman at length, and the two set to work with great vigour to induce respiration.

The crowd moved farther back still, and waited silently. The doctor and policeman worked with a will. Three more officers arrived later with an ambulance. The crowd increased every minute. The doctor pulled

off his coat at length and threw his hat upon the ground. The policeman discarded his helmet and inwardly groaned. He was not used to such hard work. Grace looked on silently, with her hand pressed tightly to her side.

There was a gurgle at length in Stephen's throat. The doctor raised him to a sitting posture. Grace gave a little cry, and sank unconscious to the ground.

Then Mr. Mayne came upon the scene, and, after a few hurried words with the doctor, gave directions that Stephen should be conveyed to the Vicarage, which was close at hand. Grace recovered herself after a few minutes, and was able to walk home, leaning on her father's arm. Then the crowd dispersed as silently as it came, leaving two policemen in charge of the church.

Stephen remained more or less unconscious during the whole of the night. The first thing he remembered clearly was Grace Mayne's sweet and homely face bending over him.

She saw the light of recognition in his eyes in a moment, and her heart gave a great throb.

"Don't try to talk just yet," she said.
"You have been ill."

"But where am I?" he questioned feebly.

"At the Vicarage. You were quite unconscious when they brought you here last night."

"But why? How? I don't seem to remember——"

"There was an escape of gas in the vestry, and you were overcome by it."

"An escape of gas? Let me think," and he closed his eyes.

She watched him narrowly, but his face revealed nothing. He felt like a man chasing shadows, vague, shapeless, unsubstantial things, that danced away in front of him, but would not be caught.

He opened his eyes again after awhile, and looked up into the face of his companion. He did not speak. Asking questions was too great an effort. It was too much of an effort even to think. But it was pleasant to feel the unspoken sympathy of Grace's presence. She seemed to cast a cooling shadow on his hot and throbbing brow. She was rest, and peace, and shelter personified.

He never thought of debating the question

whether she was pretty or plain. The only thing he was vividly conscious of was that he liked to have her near him. She went away sometimes, and was away from him so long that he wondered in a vague way if she had left him altogether. What ailed him he could not quite understand. He had no pain and no anxiety. Two desires he had : the one to be left undisturbed, the other to have Grace near him.

The report of his death was contradicted in two or three papers the next morning, but the contradiction had much less prominence given to it than the original statement. Moreover, Stephen was such a small unit among so many millions, that to the great host of newspaper readers it was a matter of no moment whether this East-end curate lived or died.

Marcella was so concerned about Frank Priestley that she did not notice the brief and obscure paragraph which announced that the asphyxiated clergyman had recovered consciousness. She would have heaved a sigh of relief if she had seen it—would have offered a prayer for his recovery. But she could never worry herself about him any more.

In one of the morning papers there was a long article devoted to Frank Priestley and his work. His tragic fate had brought his name into prominence. Science had its martyrs as well as religion, and it seemed likely that Dr. Priestley's name would be added to the roll. Marcella read the article with shining eyes and trembling lips. So many things were told that she had never heard of before. He was too modest a man and too great a man to speak of his own achievements. Among the poor mainly his work had been done—done unostentatiously, and without hope of reward. And what a work it was! Work that tried the nerve and brought into play every element of moral and physical courage. How often he had risked his life—risked it calmly and deliberately—that he might prolong the lives of others, no one knew until now, and even now only a fragment of the story had been told.

Marcella felt her heart throbbing tumultuously as she read. Had he been some stranger whom she had never seen her pulse would have been quickened by such a story. How could anyone read a tale of such splendid heroism without feeling better and nobler?

And this man had been her friend, and more than her friend, and she had spurned him.

The tears that overflowed her eyes when she had finished the article were not only those of grief, but also of contrition. How bitterly she repented only God knew. She ought to have known better, and judged him with a juster judgment. Had he not been the best friend she ever had? Did she not owe to him what at one time she valued almost as much as life itself? Had she not heard words from his lips that should have turned any woman's heart to pity? Now she was paying the penalty.

She repented sincerely enough, but repentance brought no relief. Repentance altered nothing, restored nothing. If she could only be sure that Frank Priestley forgave her, it would lighten her cross immeasurably. But even forgiveness would not restore what had been lost.

She never realised until now how stern were the laws of God, and how inflexible the moral order. Nay, it seemed to her that the law was not only inflexible, but almost revengeful.

There was a grim irony in the situation. What power or influence was it that compelled her, in spite of herself, to love Frank Priestley, the man she had spurned and insulted? Was there some grinning, spiteful, mischievous fate that took a delight in human suffering?

She had not tried to love Dr. Priestley. She had tried to forget him. She had let her heart and her thoughts go out to another. She had not seen his face for months. Absence, instead of weakening the bond, had strengthened it. And now the papers said he was dying, and she could pass no message to him, and get no word of comfort from his lips.

She spent more money in newspapers than she had ever been in the habit of doing before, and every paper she bought she was almost afraid to open. So anxious was she that her own special work was neglected. She could not go with words of hope to others, when her own heart was breaking with grief and anxiety.

The days seemed interminable; the suspense was becoming unbearable. She tried to hope that no news was good news. She told herself that, being a medical man of

distinction, a man of whom great things had been hoped and expected, he would get the best medical advice and attention in London, and that, being young and strong, he would stand a much better chance than an older man ; but nothing could shut her eyes to the fact that his case was one of grave and extreme peril.

“ Oh, if I could see him but for a minute ! ” she would say to herself sometimes, with a look of anguish on her face. “ I impugned his honour, and threw doubt upon his motives. If I could withdraw the words, I think he would forgive me.”

The tension became so great after awhile that she felt she could risk everything. What mattered it what people thought or said ? What need she care about people’s praise or blame ? To get peace of mind she was prepared to defy the world.

“ I can but be refused,” she said, “ and I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I tried.”

It was not without a hard struggle that she came to this resolution, but when her mind was made up nothing could turn her from her purpose.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST DESIRE.

FRANK PRIESTLEY lay waiting with perfect calmness the approach of the last enemy. He was sorry for many things to have to leave the world and pass out into the great silence, and yet he did not regret doing what he had done. A doctor who rightly appreciated the greatness of his profession lived and died for his fellows. He undertook the risk, knowing all the peril he ran. He hoped, of course, that he would suffer no harm—hoped that the experiment would prove successful, not only in the case of the patient, but in his own immunity from contagion. It was not to be so, however. He had saved the patient's life, but the price he had paid was the greatest that mortal man could pay.

Well, it could not be helped. He had done his duty. He had not only saved a life, but he had contributed something—

how much he did not know—to the sum total of human knowledge. It might be true that the life he had saved was of no great value as far as the world was concerned. Humanly speaking, his own life was worth a hundred such. But human measurements were often at fault. Only God could rightly appraise the relative value of men. Moreover, by sacrificing his own life, as he had done, he might in the days to come save a thousand. So that he was not disposed to give way to regrets on that score.

It was only natural that he would like to live. He was on the threshold of a great career. He was already spoken of in the profession as one of the coming men. Several of his experiments had led to very valuable discoveries, and he had seen opening up before him illimitable vistas of usefulness. There were plenty of other men, however, who would take up and carry on his work. No man was essential. The wisest and greatest, when he dropped out of the ranks, was only missed for a day—the ranks closed up, the race marched forward to its inevitable destiny.

He sometimes looked with wondering

eyes into the future. What lay beyond the shadows? When his heart had ceased to beat, what then? "If a man die, shall he live again?" The eternal question haunted him now and then as it haunts every thinking individual. He shrank instinctively from the thought of falling into an eternal sleep—

"A sleep which no propitious power dispels,
Nor changing seasons nor revolving years."

He was greedy of life. He had only just begun to live, and life seemed such a beautiful thing that he wanted it to continue. He would have been infinitely thankful for some sure vision of another world, where he might pursue the hopes and dreams that inspired him here. He listened sometimes, hoping that some voice, the authority of which he could not doubt, might speak to him out of the silence and tell him that the life he longed for was awaiting him—that beyond the shadow was a new land infinitely more beautiful than that he was leaving.

In the main, however, he was quite content to leave the future with God. The simple faith of his childhood remained with him still. He had no elaborate creed. The eternal fatherhood of God, the atoning merit of

Christ, the comfort and inspiration of the Spirit, summed up his religious beliefs. The things that ecclesiastics wrangled about seemed infinitely trivial to him now. What mattered it to a dying man whether a priest faced the east or the west—whether he was in what he called the apostolical succession or out of it—whether he mixed water with the wine or did without the wine altogether—whether he baptised by sprinkling or immersion—whether he wore vestments of a certain shape and material or whether he discarded them entirely—or whether he intoned the Psalms or read them in a natural commonsense way? The garments and trappings of ecclesiasticism seemed so vain and pitiful. The hair-splittings of metaphysicians—what did they amount to? The iron creeds that men formulated—what were they worth? A dying man wanted something different—something nearer, stronger, simpler.

To know that he was a child of God, loved and cared for in his last hours, that was all his heart desired, and that was the sum and substance of Frank Priestley's creed.

While he had strength he took careful note of each symptom, and marked with curious interest the development of the disease. He knew well enough the phases through which he would pass, and measured the probable limit of his strength. He discussed with his brother physicians the probable complications that would arise, and suggested experimental measures that might be tried.

But there came a time when he ceased to take interest in his physical condition. The disease had entered upon its last and final stage, but he was too weak to concern himself about phases or symptoms.

"I am in no pain, Blandford," he said to the doctor who was standing by his bedside, "but I am so tired. It will be very sweet to rest."

"You must not give up hope yet," Dr. Blandford answered. "You have a wonderful amount of vitality."

"I have neither hope nor fear," he answered with a wan smile. "I just want to lie still."

"Oh, well, we have no intention of disturbing you at present, but don't

give up the struggle before you are compelled."

Frank answered him with a smile, but did not speak.

"Is there anyone you would like to see?" Dr. Blandford questioned; but Frank only shook his head.

There was one he would like to see—one for a sight of whose face he had pined ever since he was stricken down. But he had never mentioned his desire to anyone. What was the good? She had told him that she hoped he would never cross her path again, and he had done his best to fulfil her desire. Since the day she drove away from the hospital he had never seen her, and yet, curiously enough, never a day had passed that she had not been more or less in his thoughts.

He had never tried very hard to forget her. In his heart he did not want to forget her. He would have forgotten, if he could, the one painful episode in their life; but for the rest it was very pleasant to think of the long hours of delightful intercourse they had had with each other. She was the only woman he had ever loved, and she seemed to

him still one of the sweetest and noblest women that ever breathed.

He had never been angry with her. He had felt hurt and pained—that was all. For the outcome of their last interview he acknowledged to himself that he was more to blame than she. There was justification, no doubt, for the course he took. He was right in his estimate of Stephen Winslow. Events had proved that he had never really loved Marcella ; he had only been fascinated by her face. Still, the honourable course is ever the straight course. The modern gospel that in love and war wrong may be right and deceit a virtue he could never subscribe to. He had been brought up in a home in which honour was regarded as the keynote of religion, and he was quite prepared to admit—and he had repented of it ever since—that in hiding the truth from Stephen he had yielded to his worst self.

That the penalty was out of all proportion to the offence he could not help feeling. Marcella and he had been the best of friends, and if he had learned to love her it was not altogether his own fault. She had shown a preference for his company in many little

ways, and it seemed hardly just that for one failure in his struggle after the ideal he should be doomed to perpetual banishment from her presence. It was not for him, however, to plead for a mitigation of the sentence. It was her will, and she had shown no sign of relenting.

During the days of his illness his heart turned toward her constantly. He felt that he had a right to think of her without treason to his friend. That Stephen had received his dismissal was clear enough. Stephen had not told him so in so many words ; but reading between the lines during their conversation, it was not at all difficult to get at the exact truth.

He had not been able to repress a smile when Stephen told him that during the whole of their interview she never once lifted the veil from her face. It was clear she was determined to get hold of the whole truth.

“ And you let her know fair and square that it was her face that had fascinated you ? ” Frank questioned.

“ Well, I am not sure that I was quite as frank as I ought to have been,” Stephen said hesitatingly ; “ but then, you see, she

is very discerning, and she read me like a book."

"Nevertheless, you were prepared to stand by your offer?"

"Oh, yes; I told her that honestly enough, though I felt a bit mean, for, as you know, I am not much of a catch for anybody."

"Well, that, of course, may be a debatable point," Frank said, with a laugh. "She thought a tremendous deal of you at one time."

"I believe she did—yes, I believe she did," Stephen replied musingly. "The fact is, I thought a good deal of myself at one time. I was rather puffed up because I was a 'priest,' as I called myself, and fancied myself a good deal better than the ordinary individual."

"The Dissenter, for instance?"

"Don't taunt me with that, Priestley. God has humbled me since. There is no respect of persons with Him."

"You have learnt a good many things during the last few months," Frank said, after a pause.

"Things I should have learned years ago

if I had not been blinded by bigotry and spiritual pride."

"And what about Marcella now?"

"She will find her own mate in time, and someone worthy of her."

"But her face——"

"Don't taunt me, Priestley. When Marcella is truly loved it will be for the beauty of her life and character."

"Then you own that you never truly loved her?"

"I was fascinated, intoxicated, bewildered, if you like; and when she was smitten down it seemed to me as though everything were lost."

"And is she fretting, do you think?"

"Over the destruction of an ideal! Oh, Priestley, it is very humbling, but she discovered that I had not only feet of clay, but a heart of clay."

"Now you are too hard upon yourself," Frank said with a smile.

"I am trying to be a better man," Stephen answered, as he put on his hat and went out into the street.

Frank thought of that conversation for a good many days after, and wondered if

Marcella would show any sign of relenting. But no sign was given. She had proved now that he was right in what he had said about Stephen, but that clearly had not changed her attitude toward himself. He was still an outcast from her presence.

During his illness a great many people called and left their cards. One or two very special friends he had seen. The list of names was read over to him each evening so long as he was able to take any interest ; but Marcella's name was never among them. Not that it mattered. Nothing could matter very much now. When life is ebbing swiftly to its close, things that once seemed vastly important become of no value whatever.

Yet it was not without a feeling of surprise that he discovered that the desire to see Marcella's face outlived every other earthly wish. Long after he ceased to take any interest in his profession, in his friends, in the affairs of the world generally, the desire to see Marcella was as intense as ever. He would lie still for hours with closed eyes and ears, deaf to all outward sounds, and all the while his thought would be of Marcella.

The passion for life was gradually losing its hold. The fear of death was passing into a great longing to be at rest ; but he had a fancy that rest would be sweeter and sleep more profound if he could only see Marcella once more ere the light faded for ever.

She had been his friend. He had enjoyed the light of her eyes a hundred times before he realised what it meant. Her smile had given him hope and encouragement when difficult tasks confronted him, and it seemed to him like a false note in music that he should pass out of life unreconciled and unforgiven.

“ Is there anyone you would like to see ? ” Dr. Blandford had questioned, little dreaming what was in his heart.

And he had shaken his head. Marcella's wish must be respected, though his heart broke. She used the word “ never.” She meant it then ; she evidently meant it still.

So he went steadily deeper among the shadows, uncheered by that smile which, next to the smile of God, would have been his greatest solace.

His friends, the doctors, were a little disappointed that he let the world slip so easily.

So much depends on a man's will power whether he sinks or survives, and Frank was not making the desperate fight for life that was necessary if he was to tide himself over the crisis. The world had lost its alluring power. The one thing that could awaken within him an intense and dominant passion for existence was absent. Life without love loses most of its charm.

CHAPTER XXIII.

OUT OF THE SHADOW.

MARCELLA'S request that she might be allowed to see Dr. Priestley was met by a direct negative. "He is too ill, madam, to see anyone."

"But I think he would see me if he knew I was here."

"I do not think so. Since yesterday, I am told, he has taken no notice of anyone."

"Do you know if the doctors entertain any hope of his recovery?"

"I believe none. His case has been regarded with the gravest doubts from the first."

"Has he seen none of his friends during his illness?"

"A few during the first week. But none lately."

"Still, that is no reason why he should not see me."

“No one sees him now but the doctors and nurses.”

“Is anyone with him at the present time?”

“I believe Dr. Blandford is with him.”

“Then will you take my card to Dr. Blandford and say I wish to see him?”

“You know Dr. Blandford?”

Marcella drew herself up proudly, and her eyes flashed in a moment.

The matron saw her mistake, and hastened to repair it. “Of course, if you know Dr. Blandford ——” she began.

But Marcella cut her short instantly.

“Whether I know Dr. Blandford or not is not the question. Will you let him know that I wish to see him?”

“Well, of course, I have no doubt when he is at liberty he will see you,” and she walked rather sulkily away.

Marcella sat down on a not very comfortable chair and waited. “I wonder if it is true,” she reflected, “that women as a class are less obliging than men? I am sure any man would have treated me at least with courtesy.”

For a long time no one came near her.

On the opposite side of the wall of the room a large timepiece ticked drowsily. Outside the City roared in a solemn and subdued fashion. Within, scarcely a sound was heard.

Every few minutes Marcella heaved a long sigh and looked eagerly toward the door. It was only by a tremendous effort that she could sit still. Her nerves were at the highest point of tension. Her heart was throbbing at fever speed. No one knew what it had cost her to get so far. She knew how liable to misconstruction was her action. The Mrs. Grundys of her circle would lift up their hands in strong disapproval. But she had got beyond all that ; she had done Frank Priestley a wrong, and she could not let him die without telling him that she had made a mistake, and asking his forgiveness.

She looked up at length with a start as a gentleman entered quickly, holding her card between his finger and thumb. His manner was brusque and unceremonious. Marcella wondered what the matron had said to him.

On catching sight of Marcella's face, however, his own cheeks flushed in an instant, and his whole manner changed.

He had been informed that a woman—and a very pertinacious one at that—wanted to see him ; but the tone in which the message was conveyed impressed him very much more than the message itself. He did not hurry to the waiting-room. He had no great liking for elderly spinsters with a message or a mission, and he quite expected to be confronted with one such.

When, however, Marcella stood before him in almost perfect beauty, he felt absolutely speechless. So lovely a face he fancied he had never seen before. Her cheeks were tinged with exquisite colour, her magnificent eyes were eager and sparkling, her lips were parted, revealing two rows of pearly teeth.

“ I—I beg your pardon,” he said, glancing at her card again. “ I fear I entered the room with unseemly haste.”

“ I am sorry to trespass upon your time,” she replied, with forced calmness. “ I came, hoping I might be allowed to see Dr. Priestley.”

“ Yes ? ” he questioned, a puzzled look stealing into his eyes.

“ We are quite old friends,” she went on, with heightened colour, “ though we

have not seen each other for a long time now. But when I heard that he was ill and not likely to recover, I could not resist the desire to come and see him."

"He has seen no one for a good many days now," he answered.

"So I understand. But if there is no hope of his recovery, it cannot harm him to see an old friend."

"No," he said reflectively; "it might——" Then he checked himself, and left the sentence unfinished.

"I understand he is quite conscious?" she said, after a pause.

"Oh, yes; but he is suffering now from extreme weakness and exhaustion. I fear he would not be able to talk to you."

"You will let me see him, then?" And an eager look came into her eyes.

"Well, yes; I think you may," he said slowly. "But I will go and prepare him for your coming." And he hurried quickly out of the room.

Frank was lying with closed eyes and a look of great peace upon his face. He had got beyond the region of care and fret. The world was behind him now, and

"But Sam's tragic end throws no light on your own adventure?"

"Well, no. It has raised a number of questions—that is all. I intend to keep my eyes open and wait. There is a moral order in the world as well as a physical. Harvest always follows seed-time. Conduct brings its own punishment or its own reward."

"In the long run that is true, no doubt. But——" The next moment there was a knock at the door, which was pushed quickly open. And Marcella—unaware of Stephen's presence—entered radiant and beautiful.

Stephen rose to his feet instantly, and looked toward the door. Frank watched his face with great interest and not a little amusement. His eyes opened to their widest limits, his lips fell apart, his hands dropped limply to his side, his whole attitude was one of wonder, almost of consternation.

Marcella stopped short in the middle of the room. Then an amused smile stole over her face. For a moment she glanced from Stephen to Frank, and back again to Stephen, and in that moment she was able to compare and to contrast the two men as she had never done before.

She did not doubt Stephen's goodness and sincerity ; but he was not great, clear-visioned, heroic, in the sense that Frank was. He was a man of smaller soul and more limited outlook, while his natural limitations had been accentuated by his ecclesiastical training. Sacerdotalism is fatal to the highest development. The priest is not a man plus something, but a man minus something. Marcella wondered where once she had kept her eyes.

She felt no embarrassment when she advanced and held out her hand to her old lover ; but she was greatly amused at the look of wonder and incredulity in his eyes.

He took her hand timidly in his, as if uncertain what to do.

" You did not expect to see me here ? " she questioned, with a bright and mischievous smile.

" Why—why—no," he gasped, still staring at her as though he could not believe his own eyes.

" I am glad to see you are quite recovered from your recent—accident," she said, with

before him the unseen land with its untold mysteries.

The door opened silently, and Dr. Blandford came up to his bedside, but Frank did not open his eyes.

“Are you asleep?” Dr. Blandford questioned.

The tired eyes opened slowly, and a gentle smile stole over his face.

“Well, I want you to rouse yourself a bit. A lady is coming to see you.”

The eyes opened a little wider.

“A very beautiful lady. Upon my soul, I think I never saw a lovelier.”

Frank’s eyes were wide open now.

“She says she is an old friend of yours, and wants to see you particularly. Her name is——”

“Marcella Dacre,” Frank whispered feebly.

“Yes; that’s her name. May she come up?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Blandford retired at once, and Frank closed his eyes again and strained his ears to listen. He heard her footfalls long before she reached the door, heard the rustle of

her dress, and just the faintest shade of colour stole slowly into his wasted cheeks.

He waited till she was standing by his bedside before he opened his eyes. He knew when the doctor closed the door and they were alone together. It seemed as though the breath of spring blew across his bed; he felt her presence through every fibre of his being. He opened his eyes at length, slowly and wearily, and saw her perfect face bending over him.

“Marcella,” he whispered, and he raised feebly his tired hand.

She grasped it in a moment, but did not speak. But he saw her eyes fill and overflow her cheeks.

For several moments no sound broke the silence. She held his wasted hand in a strong, warm clasp. Then she fought back her emotion, and spoke :

“I have come to ask your forgiveness for the wicked things I said to you——”

“Don’t, don’t, Marcella,” he interrupted with energy. “I have nothing to forgive.”

“Nothing?” she questioned. “And I imputed unworthy motives, and forgot to be grateful when you saved my life? Let



"‘I COULD NOT LET YOU DIE WITHOUT TELLING YOU.’"

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me ease my heart by telling you how sorry I am."

He looked at her wonderingly, but did not reply.

"I could not let you die without telling you," she went on with a fresh rush of tears to her eyes. "We had been friends, and I parted from you in anger and with enmity."

"You had reason to be angry with me, Marcella," he said faintly; "but that is all over now."

"I thought I had reason," she replied, "and yet events have proved that you were right."

"Let us forget it now," he said in a whisper. "Forget it all. We are friends once more."

"I am not worthy to be your friend," she said impulsively; "but I could not rest without telling you how sorry I felt."

He smiled a slow, gentle smile, and pointed to a chair. "Will you not sit there, Marcella," he said, "and let me look at you?"

She seated herself at once, and the light from the window revealed all the glory of

her face. For a long time neither of them spoke. Frank looked at her steadily, with wistful and hungry eyes.

"You are very beautiful, Marcella," he whispered at length. "God must be good to make a human face so fair; and yet it was not for your face that I loved you."

She gave a sudden gasp, but did not reply.

"You will not be angry with me, Marcella," he went on, in the same low whisper. "It cannot matter to you now. I am so far down in the land of shadows that nothing can matter much. Yet it does me good to look upon your face."

"But you will get better," she said impulsively. "You must get better."

He closed his eyes slowly and smiled. "Why should I get better?" he said wistfully. "I have given up everything. Why should I go back to fight the old battles over again?"

"Given up everything?" she questioned.

"Everything," he answered. "My last desire was to see you. Now that has been granted to me: it was good of you to come."

"I did not know you wanted to see me."

“When all other desires had faded, that still lingered with me. You see, I loved you, Marcella. I think my love for you has been the purest thing in my life. It was rooted deepest, and so it lasted longest.”

She reached out her hands to him in an appealing gesture, but he did not seem to heed.

“In the land out yonder,” he said, with closed eyes, “I shall watch and wait.”

“No, no ; you must not leave me,” she said chokingly ; “you must get better, for my sake.”

“For your sake ? ” he questioned, and he opened his eyes and looked at her.

She came nearer and took both his hands in hers and held them tightly.

“I cannot let you go,” she said, with a great sob.

“Marcella ! ” and there was a note of wonder in his voice.

“Oh, Frank, do you not understand ? ” And she knelt on the floor and hid her face in the bedclothes and sobbed.

He reached out his hand and laid it gently on her shining hair. He hardly knew whether he was awake or dreaming.

"Marcella," he whispered at length, "will you be very sorry when I am gone?"

"You must not go," she cried, raising her streaming face to his. "Oh, Frank, Frank, let us both pray very hard that God will spare you."

"If I had known you cared," he whispered, as if speaking to himself, "if I had only known——"

"But surely it is not too late," she cried, and she seized his hands again as if she would vitalise him with some of her own energy.

"How strong you are!" he whispered, and he closed his eyes slowly and smiled.

She was still holding his hands when the door opened and Dr. Blandford entered.

Marcella showed no embarrassment, but quietly released his hands.

"You will come again?" he whispered.

"To-morrow," she answered, and passed out into the corridor.

Dr. Blandford forbore to ask any questions, but he fancied he was clever enough to see how matters stood.

By the following day it seemed clear that Marcella had supplied just the tonic

that Frank needed. At last he had something to live for, something worth fighting death for, something that woke into life all the will power he possessed.

Whether he would win or lose in the battle was still a doubtful question. Marcella came every day. Her presence was more than medicine. Her very hopefulness gave hope to Frank. He began to take interest again in his own symptoms. The desire for life asserted itself once more ; the tonic of requited love gave vigour to his heart.

And yet the doubtful scale remained doubtful for many days. Now it seemed to incline in one direction, and now in another. But youth and hope and love were all on his side, and in the end they conquered. It was a triumphant day for Marcella when the doctor pronounced him out of danger. Frank knew without being told.

"I owe my life to you, Marcella," he said, a glad smile lighting up his face.

And for answer she bent over and kissed him.

"You held my hands when I was slipping over the precipice," he went on ; "but for you I should have died."

"I could not spare you, Frank," she said with brimming eyes ; "and God meant you to stay. You have more work to do in the world yet."

"And you will stand by my side and encourage me, darling ?"

"Oh, Frank, I shall be the proudest woman in the world if I can help you in any way."

"I am afraid you have made a poor bargain, sweetheart," he said playfully. "I am but a wreck at best."

"You will soon be as well and strong as ever," she answered fondly, "and remember that for the future I shall keep guard over you."

"My life shall be given to you, darling. To you first, and then to God and my work."

"No, no, Frank ; to God first, for He has given us to each other. Then, by serving His creatures, you will serve Him."

So they talked to each other as the tide of his life crept slowly back ; talked as lovers will talk, and imagined that no two people were ever so happy before ; talked of the future and made a thousand plans for home, and work, and happy intercourse ; talked of the

past, and discussed the dreams they had cherished and the mistakes they had made ; talked of the present, and declared that no two people in the world were half so happy as they. And while they talked, life greatened for them both.

CHAPTER XXIV.

“WE LOSE TO GAIN.”

FRANK PRIESTLEY was recuperating at the house of a friend at Hampstead. Stephen Winslow had come up to spend an hour or two with him. The day was beautifully fine, and the window at which they sat commanded a fine view of the surrounding country. Frank was expecting Marcella every moment, and was hoping that Stephen would remain long enough to see her. They had almost exhausted their topics of conversation, but Frank managed to re-introduce one or two of the more interesting. He must keep Stephen, if possible, till Marcella came. He was in a triumphant mood. He had won the noblest and the most beautiful woman he had ever known, and Stephen was still under the impression that her beauty was entirely a thing of the past.

Stephen made a movement as if to go, and Frank arrested him by saying, “I am

not sure, Winslow, you acted wisely in saying nothing to the police about that affair of yours."

"Well, I have sometimes doubted myself," Stephen answered, settling himself into his chair again. "You see, the story seems rather an absurd one. I simply allowed myself to be chloroformed, and when I was unconscious the fellow turned on all the gas-jets and the gas-stove, and went out and closed the door."

"It was lucky for you that Grace Mayne happened to pass by. But what could the man's motive be?"

"That is the puzzle, and that makes my story appear all the more absurd. So I have kept quiet, hoping that sooner or later something will come to light."

"Is there anyone who would have an interest in your death?"

"I've thought of that. There was only poor Sam, and he was out of the country. Yet I confess his tragic end has raised all sorts of questions in my mind. To begin with, I do not understand where he got the money from to go to Monte Carlo. And he must have been possessed of a great deal.

From inquiries I have made, he took expensive rooms on his arrival, and he played for large stakes from the very first. Yet, in London, he was always living from hand to mouth, and had never a five-pound note to call his own."

"I suppose he had no securities on which he could raise a loan?"

Stephen laughed. "Bless you, Sam had nothing but his own industry to depend upon, and that was by no means a very valuable asset."

"Do you think he committed suicide?"

"Not he. My own theory is, there was an attempt to murder and rob him. You will remember there was a second body at the foot of the cliff, not far from where Sam's body was found. The two men fell together, I believe."

"Then you think there was a struggle at the top?"

"I do. Sam had a lot of money on him. How he came by it I do not know. I would not touch a penny of it."

"You have given it to some charity, I understand?"

Stephen nodded.



"SHE FELT NO EMBARRASSMENT WHEN SHE ADVANCED
AND HELD OUT HER HAND."

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the same amused smile lighting up her face.

"Oh, yes—thank you—I'm—I'm—all right again."

He seemed to be answering her while his thoughts were somewhere else, though he kept his eyes steadily fixed on her face.

"I was sorry to hear of the sad end of your cousin," she said, withdrawing her hand from his.

He seemed to come to himself then with a start. "Yes, it was very painful," he said slowly; "very painful and very puzzling. But will you allow me to congratulate you on looking so well? I did not expect——"

Then he stopped suddenly short, and a hot blush swept over his face.

She laughed a low, musical laugh, for the memory of their last interview presented itself to her in its most humorous aspect.

"Thank you; I was never better in my life," she answered.

"Yes, yes." And his eyes swept her face again. "We have all had to pass through the fire in various ways."

"And have all found something worth

possessing on the farther side," Frank interposed at this point.

"Yes—yes. We lose to gain, if—if we do gain," he said, with another swift glance at Marcella's face.

"I have gained, at any rate," Frank said, with a laugh. "You are not aware, of course, that Marcella has promised to be my wife?"

"No," he said with a gasp, and his cheeks blanched in a moment.

"I have kept it as a surprise for you. You will congratulate me, I know."

Marcella stood aside, blushing and smiling, but feeling on the whole rather uncomfortable. She felt that it was rather cruel to Stephen, and she disliked giving pain to anyone.

Stephen turned his head and looked at her. She was more beautiful even than before her illness, for the light of a great love illumined her face and sparkled in her eyes.

It was only by a mighty effort that he was able to master himself. "I hope you will be very happy, Marcella," he said, with a shake in his voice; then, turning to Frank,

he said, almost in a whisper, "You are a fortunate man. God bless you both." And turning hurriedly, he left the room.

Frank went and closed the door, and then came back to Marcella.

"Yes, I am a fortunate man, darling," he whispered, and he kissed her on the brow.

"It is I who am fortunate," she answered, with swimming eyes.

He led her to a sofa and sat down by her side, and for awhile they looked out across the wide expanse of country without speaking. There are occasions when silence is more eloquent than speech, and this was one of them. Timidly her hand stole into his and rested there. They were both thinking of Stephen and of his words: "We lose to gain—if we do gain."

Had Stephen gained, or had he lost? He had been hampered by superstitions, warped by dogmas, deflected from the straight path by the limitations of his training, fettered by ecclesiasticism when he ought to have been free. And now that he was coming into freedom, the marks of the fetters still remained. We cannot recover in a later

period of our lives what we miss in an earlier. Only sometimes God gives other things to compensate.

"Stephen will find his true life by-and-by," Frank said, as if thinking aloud.

"He has much to unlearn, even yet," she answered.

"Perhaps we all have, darling," he said, with a smile.

"What would you like to unlearn, Frank?" she questioned, looking up into his face with a happy smile.

"Nothing of what I have lately learned, sweetheart."

"No?"

"I have learned that Marcella loves me."

"Yes?"

"And that knowledge is more to me than everything else on earth."

"You will not regret it?"

"Never, darling. God made you to be mine."

"He meant us for each other." And then silence fell again.

Frank never did regret it; neither did Marcella. Their happiness, like a river,

seemed to gather in strength and volume as the years passed away, and no shadow ever fell to dim the glory of their love.

They neither of them saw Stephen again for nearly three years, by which time he was the vicar of an East-end parish, and the devoted husband of Grace Mayne.

Frank and Marcella were living in Harley Street, and every day his consulting room was crowded with suffering people, who were eager to consult the young and rising physician.

One day Stephen called to consult him—not as a physician, but as a friend.

"I've discovered the man who tried to murder me," he said, when they were alone together.

"You have?" Frank questioned eagerly.

"Stumbled across him in the street by accident. I knew him in a moment, and tracked him down. Now, I am at a loss whether to bring him to heel or leave him in the hands of a just God. What do you advise?"

"Who is he?"

"A Jew by birth, a money-lender by profession, a vampire by practice."

"But why did he want to murder you?"

"That I don't know. I can only guess."

As it happened, however, his guess was very near the truth.

"It's a plausible theory, at any rate," Frank said, when Stephen had unburdened his mind; "and you say that he lives in the West-end?"

"He does." And Stephen mentioned his name and address.

Frank started. "Why, he's a patient of mine," he replied.

Then a moment of silence intervened.

"You need not worry him," Frank said at length. "He's slowly dying of an incurable disease."

"Then I'll leave him in the hands of God," Stephen said, and he rose to go.

"You must not go yet," Frank interposed quickly. "You must see Marcella and our little one."

"Ah, yes; I would like to see them. But I promised Grace not to stay away long."

"She is well, I hope."

"Yes, very well. She is a great comfort to me, and a great help also in my work."

"And you like your new parish?"

"As much as anyone can like the East-end. One's joy comes through trying to bring a little joy into the lives of others. One pines sometimes for pleasanter scenes and less sordid pictures of life; but on the whole we are very happy. Grace is by nature cheerful, and so long as I am with her she is quite content. It is a great thing, Priestley, to be blessed with a contented spirit."

"It is indeed. But here comes my wife," and Marcella, beautiful as the morning, glided into the room with a six-months'-old cherub in her arms.

Stephen heaved a deep sigh and smiled wistfully. Frank caught up the laughing baby and kissed it.

"It's a beautiful baby," Stephen said, and he touched its soft cheek with his long, thin finger.

"Of course, it's beautiful," Frank said, laughing; and he tossed it into the air and kissed it again and again.

"You will stay to tea, won't you?" Marcella interposed at this point.

But Stephen shook his head. "I must get home to Grace," he said; "she'll be

expecting me, and I never like to disappoint her."

"Then some day you must bring her with you," Marcella said.

"Yes, yes. Thank you very much. Some day we will come together."

But that day has not dawned yet.

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